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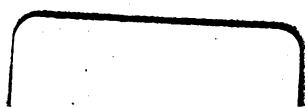
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# *Less Than Kin*

*By*

*Alice Duer Miller*



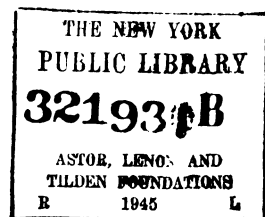
*New York*

*Henry Holt and Company*

*1909*

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*Published May, 1909*

QUINN & BODEN COMPANY PRESS  
RAHWAY, N. J.

# LESS THAN KIN

## Chapter I

> **T**HE curtain rolled down, the horns gave  
, forth a final blare, and the whole  
house rustled with returning self-conscious-  
ness. Mrs. Raikes and Miss Lewis had al-  
ways had orchestra seats for Monday nights.  
Their well-brushed heads, their high jeweled  
collars, their little bare backs were as familiar  
to experienced opera-goers as the figure of the  
long-suffering doorman. They had the repu-  
tation of being musical. What indeed could  
prove it better than their preference for or-  
chestra seats, when they might so easily have  
gone whenever they wanted in the boxes of  
their friends?

As the lights went up, they both turned to

the glittering tiers above them. The opera was a favorite and the house was full, though here and there an empty box caught one's eye like a missing tooth. Miss Lewis was sweeping the semicircle like an astronomer in full cry after a comet. She had begun conscientiously at the stage box, and with but few comments she had reached the third or fourth, when her hand was arrested. There were three people in it—an old man in a velvet skull-cap, tall, thin, wrinkled, and strangely somber against the red-and-gold background; a younger man dimly seen in the shadow; and a slim young woman in gray.

The curve of the house afforded examples of every sort and kind of brilliantly dressed lady. There were dowagers and young girls, there were women who forgot the public and lounged with an arm over the back of a little gilt chair, and there were others who sat almost too erect, presenting their jewels and

their composed countenances to the gaze of whoever cared to admire.

The lady in gray did neither. She sat leaning a little forward, and looking down absently into the orchestra, so that it was hard to tell how attentively she was listening to the man behind her. She had an extremely long waist, and had the effect of being balanced like a flower on its stalk.

Miss Lewis, with her glass still on the box, exclaimed:

"What, again! Wasn't he with the Lees last week?"

"You mean James Emmons," answered Mrs. Raikes. "He is not with Nellie. He belongs somewhere on the other side of the house. He came into the box just before the *entr'acte*. Rather she than me. He has a singularly heavy hand in social interchange."

"He could give Nellie things she would value. I am sure she feels she would shine in

high politics." Miss Lewis raised her glass again. "You know she is not really pretty."

"I think she is, only she looks as cold as a little stone."

"If you say that, every one answers, 'But see how good she is to her uncle.'"

"My dear, if you were a penniless orphan, wouldn't you be good to a rich uncle?"

Miss Lewis hesitated. "I'm not so sure, if he were like Mr. Lee. Besides, some people say he hasn't anything left, you know."

"Look how they live, though."

"My innocent! Does that prove that they pay their bills? Nellie strikes me as being very short of cash now and then."

"Who is not?"

"And the reprobate son will have to come in for something, won't he?"

"Oh, I fancy not. I don't think they have

anything to do with him. He has disappeared, to South America or somewhere."

"Well," said Miss Lewis, "I should advise Nellie not to take chances, but to accept—" And then she stopped. "Look at that," she added. "Don't you think that is a mistake?"

For the girl in gray had risen slowly, and disappeared into the back of the box, followed by Emmons.

He was a short man, no longer very young. Nature had intended him to be fat, but he had not let her have her way.

The two sat down in the little red-lined room behind the box, with its one electric light and its mirror. Nellie had established herself on the tiny sofa.

"Well, James," she said.

"I wanted to tell you that I had been appointed to this commission to inquire into the sources of our Russian immigration. I start in September."



"I congratulate you. You will be an ambassador within a few years, I feel sure."

Her praise did not seem to elate him. He went on in exactly the same tone:

"I shall be gone three months or more."

"I shall miss you." Her manner was too polite to be warm, and he answered, without temper,

"You don't care whether I go or not."

She looked at him. "Yes, I do, James," she said mildly. "You know I depend on you, but it would be very selfish if I thought of myself instead of——"

He brushed it aside, as one anxious only for facts.

"You are not really fond of me," he said.

"Well, I am not romantically in love with you. I never was with any one, and I don't suppose I ever shall be, but I like you well enough to marry you, and that is something, you know."

"You don't like me well enough to marry me in August and come to Russia with me." If he had been watching her face at this suggestion, he would not have needed an answer, but fortunately he was looking another way.

"You know I can not leave my uncle, old and ill——"

"Will you be any better able to leave him in three months?"

She hesitated, but as if it were her own motives that she was searching. "When you come back there will be no need for leaving him."

"Oh," said Emmons. He glanced through the curtains at the old man's thin back, as if the idea of a common household were not quite agreeable to him.

There was a short pause, and then he went on,

"It sometimes strikes me that if it weren't your uncle it would be something else."

"James," said Nellie seriously, "I give you my word that if there were anybody who could take my place at home, I would marry you in August."

Emmons nodded. "Well, I can't ask more than that," he answered, and added, with a smile, "though it is a perfectly safe offer, for I suppose no one can take your place."

"No one," said Nellie, with the conviction of a person who does not intend to look.

The box door opened, and a man half entered, and paused as he saw how prearranged was the tête-à-tête on which he was intruding. But Nellie welcomed him in.

"Don't be frightened away, Mr. Merriam," she said, smiling. "Mr. Emmons and I aren't talking secrets. We weren't even quarreling—at least *I* wasn't. But the lights in front hurt my eyes. Don't you think at my age I can do as I like?"

Mr. Merriam was eminently of that opin-

ion—especially as a moment later Emmons rose to go.

“Good-night.” Nellie held out her hand.  
“Don’t forget that you are dining with us on the 22d.”

“I shan’t forget,” Emmons answered.  
“I’ve written it down.”

“I shouldn’t have to write it down,” said Merriam.

“Ah, you are not such a busy man as he is,” she returned, but she could not help smiling. It was so like James to tell her he had written it down.

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## Chapter II

**T**HERE is nothing so radiant, so blue and green (unless it be a peacock), nothing so freshly washed and shining, as an early morning in the tropics.

A new President having decided to add cavalry to the army, the recruits were being drilled on a flat furrowed savannah outside the city limits. Behind them a line of hills, rugged in outline but softened by heavy vegetation, were hidden by the mist that was rolling away over the Atlantic; and all about them, at the edge of the meadow, were tall flat-topped trees, under which were dotted little pink and blue houses, like toys.

The soldiers wore blue cotton uniforms, and many of them were barefooted. Their

horses were diminutive, but sure-footed and nimble, not ill built forward of the saddle, but pitifully weak behind.

The instructor was very differently mounted. He rode a round strong bay mare, which, in contrast to the pony-like creatures about her, looked a hand higher than her actual height. Her rider sat still watching his pupils. Little of his face was visible under the brim of his broad Panama hat except a brown chin and a pair of long blond mustaches. Now and then he shouted to the men in excellent Spanish; and once or twice swore with the tolerant, unmistakable drawl of the Yankee. On the whole, however, one would have said after watching him for some minutes that his temper seemed fairly unruffled in a climate which tries men's tempers, and in an occupation which induces irritation.

Once, with some instinctive motion of his body, he put his horse at a hand gallop, and

riding over to one of the soldiers offered some individual suggestions. The man plainly did not understand, and a minute later the instructor had changed mounts with the man, and presently the pony was wheeling hither and thither in response to his bit, as a boat answers its rudder.

Exactly at ten o'clock the door of a square building in the town opened; a little trumpeter came out, and the clear notes of a bugle—so appropriate to the fierce brilliance of the morning—were flung out like a banner upon the air. It was the signal that the lesson was over. The men formed into fours, and jogged away under the command of a non-commissioned officer, leaving the American alone.

He sat a moment, watching the retreating backs, as he took a grass cigarette case from his breeches pocket, and lit a little yellow native cigarette. Then he turned his horse with

one hand, and cantered away across the savannah. As he did so, the motion and the clear brightness of the morning moved him to song. Pushing back his hat from his forehead he lifted his head:

“Oh, I’m not in a hurry to fuss or to worry,  
For fear I should grow too stout,  
And I don’t care a bit if my boots don’t fit,  
For I walk just as well without.”

He stopped in front of one of the toy houses, and shouted “Oh, Señor Doctor.”

The door, which stood open, was at once filled by the figure of a man in crash clothes. He was middle-aged and wore spectacles, so powerful that the eyes appeared to glare upon you with unspeakable ferocity, until, seeing round them or over, you found the expression friendly in the extreme.

“Ah, ha, Don Luis,” he said, “I did not know you were a singer.”

“And a poet, my dear Doctor,” returned



the other, bowing. "My own words. Could you hear them across the savannah?"

"I could have heard them over the frontier. Will you come in?"

"No, *gracias*," he answered. "I only stopped in to ask you to a party this evening, Doctor, for the lovely Rosita. It became necessary to do something to cut out that handsome young dog of a native. Will you come?"

The doctor gave a sound indicative of hesitation.

"What kind of a party?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, a perfectly respectable little party," returned Vickers, "not a bit like my last. At least it will begin respectably. It will end as my guests please. Will you come early or late, Doctor?"

"Early," said the doctor; "it is always permitted to go home. No, wait a moment,"

he added, as he saw Vickers preparing to go. "I want to ask you something. Did you ever know a big American who lived on the Pacific side—a man named Lee? Not a relation of yours, was he?"

"Certainly he is not," retorted Vickers. "I have not many causes for gratitude, but that is one. I met him only once, and then he borrowed fifteen pesos from me on the strength of a hypothetical likeness between us."

"There is a certain resemblance," observed the doctor.

"Is there? I never saw it. What has he been doing? Getting into trouble?"

"Getting out of it. He died at my house this morning."

"What of? Fever?"

"No, drink. I found him two days ago in his hut on the Pacific slope, and brought him here. One can not drink safely in this climate.

Nature is beneficent, she gives much," the doctor waved his hand, "but she also exacts much. One can not drink here, and live."

"Oh, nonsense, Doctor," said Vickers, "look at me. I'm as sound as a dollar."

"What I want of you," said the other, "is to write to his family. My English is not sufficient to make him out a hero, and," he added, with a smile, "when we write home they are always heroes. Will you undertake it?"

"Sure," said Vickers, swinging a light leg over the mare's head. As he stepped to the ground, one could see his great height, an inch or two over six feet.

"You know," the doctor went on persuasively, as they walked up the steps into the house, "that he might just as well have died, as you suggested, of fever."

"Fever, pooh!" exclaimed Vickers. "How tame! We must think of something better than that. Would fever be any con-

solation to the survivors? No, no, my dear Nuñez, something great, something inspiring. 'My dear Madame, your son, after a career unusually useful and self-denying' (the worthless dog), 'has just met a death as noble as any I have ever seen or heard of. A group of children—' No, 'a group of little children returning from school were suddenly attacked by an immense and ferocious *tigre*——' "

"Oh, come, Don Luis," murmured the doctor, "who ever heard of a *tigre* attacking a group? "

"My dear Señor Doctor," replied Vickers, "I perceive with regret that you are a realist. I myself am all for romance, pure ethereal romance. I scorn fact, and by Heaven, if I can't describe a *tigre* so that Lee's mother will believe in it, I'll eat my hat."

"In that case," returned the doctor dryly, "I suppose it is unnecessary to mention that Lee does not seem to have a mother."

"Oh, well," said Vickers, in evident discouragement, "if a fellow hasn't got a mother, that prohibits pathos at once. A wife? At least a sister?"

Núñez shook his head. "Nothing but a father," he said firmly.

Vickers flung himself into a chair with his legs very far apart and his hands in his pockets.

"Now, how in thunder," he said, "can I get up any interest in a father? A father probably knew all about Lee, and very likely turned him out of the house. A father will think it all for the best. Or no, perhaps not. An old white-haired clergyman—Lee was just the fellow to be a clergyman's son."

"I am often glad that I belong to a religion whose priests do not marry," said the doctor. "Let me get you Lee's papers."

They made but a small bundle and most of them were bills, unreceipted. Vickers drew

out one with an American stamp. It was dated Hilltop, Connecticut. Vickers read:

“My Dear Son: I enclose the money you desire for your journey home, which Nellie and I have managed to save during the last three months. I can hardly realize that I am to see you again after almost ten years.”

Vickers looked up. “Why, the poor beggar,” he said, “he was just going home after ten years. I call that hard luck.” And then his eye lit on the date of the letter, which was many months old. “By Jove, no. He took the old man’s money and blew it in, instead. Isn’t that the limit? But who is Nellie?”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, and Vickers returned to the perusal of the papers. “Bills, bills, notes, letters from women. I seem to recognize that hand, but no matter. Ah, here is another from home. Ten years old, too.”

The writing was feminine, neat, and childish.

"Dear Bob," it said, "if you left home on my account, you need not have gone.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"NELLIE."

There was a moment's silence. A feeling of envy swept over Vickers. The mere sight of an American stamp made him homesick; the mail from the States never brought him anything; and yet somewhere at home there was a girl who would write like that to a worthless creature like Lee.

"They were using those stamps when I was at home," he said reminiscently, "but they don't use them any more."

"Indeed," said the doctor, without very much interest.

"Ten years ago, just fancy it," Vickers went on, turning the letter over. "And he did

not go back. I would have, in his place. If I had an affectionate cousin Nellie—I have always been rather fond of the name Nellie. Can you understand his not going?"

"We do not understand the Anglo-Saxon, nor pretend to," returned the doctor. "You know very well, Don Luis, you all seem strangely cold to us."

"Cold!" cried Vickers, with a laugh; "well, I never was accused of that before. Wait till you see my letter to Nellie: for of course it will be to Nellie that I shall write. Or no, I can't, for I'm not sure of the last name. No. I'll write the old man after all. 'Dear Sir: It is my task to communicate a piece of news which must necessarily give you pain.' (I wish I knew how much the old boy would really care.) 'Your son expired yesterday in the performance of the bravest action that it has ever been my good fortune to see, or hear tell of. As you probably



know, Mr. Lee held a position of some responsibility in the railroad.' (It is a responsibility to keep the bar.) 'Yesterday we were all standing about after working hours' (I wonder when Lee's began), 'when a dispute arose between two of the men. In these hot climes tempers are easily roused, and words too quickly lead to blows, and blows to weapons. We all saw it, and all stood hesitating, when your son stepped forward and flung himself between the two. I grieve to say that he paid for his nobility with his life. It may be some satisfaction to you to know, my dear sir, that one of the boys whose life he saved, for both were hardly full grown, was the only son of a widowed mother.' We could not make them both only sons of widowed mothers, could we? When are you going to bury him?"

"To-morrow."

"Let me chip in for the funeral. We'll

have it handsome while we are about it. I must not stay now. Give me the letters, and I'll get it off by to-morrow's steamer. I'll make it a good one, but I need time. And I have a report to write for the President, on the progress of my troop. Have you seen them? Don't they do me credit?"

Doctor Nuñez looked at him gravely, as he stooped his head and passed out into the sunlight. As he was gathering up the reins, the older man said suddenly,

"Don Luis, would you be very much of a Yankee if I offered you a piece of advice?"

"Very much of a Yankee? I don't understand. I should be very uncommonly grateful. Your advice is rare. What is it? To give up whiskey?"

"No, but to give up Cortez. He is in bad odor with the President."

"Oh, I know, I know, but if I changed my friends in order to choose adherents of the

administration—! However, I am an administration man. I am almost in the army."

"Not always the safest place to be."

"Oh, Cortez is all right, Doctor. You don't do Cortez justice."

"On the contrary," said the doctor, "I do him full justice. I do him the justice of thinking him a very brilliant man,—but I do not walk about arm in arm with him in broad daylight. Is he coming to the party this evening?"

"I expect him."

"You could not put him off?"

"Hardly. He brings the phonograph to amuse the señoritas. Now, come, Doctor, you would not cut me off from the only man in the country who owns a talking-machine?"

The doctor sighed. "I knew you would be a Yankee," he said, and turned and walked into the house, while Vickers rode away, re-

suming his song about his indifference as to the fit of his boots.

Vickers's house was on the slopes of the hills, and a steep little white adobe stairway led up to it. The house itself was a blue-green color, and though from the outside it presented an appearance of size, it was literally a hollow mockery, for the interior was taken up with a square garden, with tiled walks, and innumerable sweet-smelling flowers. Round the inner piazza or corridor there were arches, and in these Vickers had hung orchids, of which he was something of a fancier. In the central arch was a huge gilded birdcage in which dangled a large bright-colored macaw.

"You beauty," said Vickers, stopping for an instant as he crossed the hallway.

The macaw hunched his shoulders, shifted his feet on the perch, and said stridently,

*"Dame la pata."*

"You betcher life!" said Vickers, thrusting his finger between the bars. The two shook hands solemnly, and Vickers went on his way to the dining-room, shouting at the top of a loud voice,

"Ascencion, *almuerzo*."

An instant later he was being served with coffee, eggs, and a broiled chicken by an old woman, small, bent, wrinkled, but plainly possessed of the fullest vitality.

"And what are you going to give us for supper to-night?" Vickers asked, with his mouth full.

With some sniffing, and a good deal of subterranean grunting, Ascencion replied that she did not know what to give *los Americanos* unless it were half an ox.

"Ah, but the lovely señoritas," said Vickers.

A fresh outburst of grunting was the reply.

"Ah, the Señorita Rosita. I have already

had a visit from her this morning. She comes straight into my kitchen," said the old woman. "She expects to live there some day."

"In the kitchen, Ascencion!" said her employer. "You talk as if she were a rat."

"Oh, you will see. The Señor Don Papa,—he goes about saying that he will marry his daughter to none but foreigners,—that they make the best husbands."

"So they do."

"Oh, very well, very well, if you are satisfied. It makes no difference to me. It is all the same to me that every one says this is a betrothal party, and the *niña* does not deny it."

"Ah, you know very well, proud beauty," said Vickers, waving a fork at her, "that there is only one woman in all Spanish-America for me—the only woman who knows how to cook, this side of the San Pedro. If you

choose to call this our betrothal party, yours and mine, Ascencion——”

It was a perfectly safe joke, for Ascencion was a wife, the mother of fourteen, and the grandmother of a whole village. She did not even notice the last part of his sentence.

“And who is there can cook like me on the other side of the San Pedro?” she asked. “I don’t know her;” and she hobbled away.

After breakfast, Vickers with the assistance of two or three native boys, Ascencion’s grandchildren, who came and went about the house like stray dogs, hung the court and corridors with paper lanterns, and moved the furniture so as to leave the *sala* free for dancing.

These preparations occupied so much time that he was barely able to finish his report for the government before dinner, and almost immediately afterward his guests began to arrive. He had not had time to write the

letter, and he could not now catch the mail unless he sent a boy down the trail to the coast. He actually thought of doing this in order to catch the steamer, for his conscience reproached him, but Ascencion absolutely refused to be deprived of any of her working staff on so great an occasion.

Cortez was the first to arrive. He was carrying his talking-machine in his arms as he entered, and he and Vickers had a great many jokes to exchange as to the rolls fit for the ears of the señoritas.

"It is going to be the making of the party," Vickers exclaimed, "and I can't thank you enough for bringing it."

Cortez replied politely that everything he had was equally at the disposition of his friend, but presently it appeared that it was within the power of Vickers to do a reciprocal favor. Cortez was going the very next day on a long shooting trip. But he feared he



would be short of cartridges. Doubtless Don Luis knew the delays in the custom-house. Was it possible that he could borrow a hundred or so?

Vickers asked the caliber, and noted that it was the same as the new government rifle.

Cortez shrugged his shoulders. "It may be," he said. "You forget that I am not in the confidence of the government. But we will say no more. If it is not convenient——"

"My dear fellow," cried Vickers, clapping him on the shoulder, "it is perfectly convenient; take as many as you want," and summoning one of Ascencion's descendants he gave orders that as many boxes as the señor might want should be carried out and put in his *coche*.

Almost every one had come before the arrival of the Señorita Rosita and her papa, which partook of the nature of a rite. He was a little man, very erect, possessed, in

Vickers's eyes, of that inscrutability which even the remnant of an older civilization has for a new one.

The girl was reputed a beauty, small, round, barely seventeen, with a pair of black eyes which languished so sweetly and so easily that one scarcely wondered that their owner never used them for anything else.

As his eyes met hers, Vickers cursed Ascencion in his heart for having instilled her suspicions into his mind, for it seemed to him that the lovely Rosita had never languished quite so openly upon him before. The thought affected the cordiality of his manner. His greeting was formal. Then seeing that she looked hurt, and reflecting that, if she had given her friends the notion that he was hers for the asking, it was very hard to be contradicted by his manner, he sprang forward and led her away to dance.

Soon afterward, having surrendered her to

another partner, he found himself standing beside her father, and never at a loss for a pleasant word he observed that the señorita was undoubtedly the handsomest girl he had ever seen, and how did any one support the responsibility of having such a pretty daughter?

The old gentleman smiled.

"It is not a responsibility which I look forward to supporting very much longer, Don Luis."

"Oh, I suppose not," said Vickers, and he thought with some annoyance of the good-looking native for whose destruction the party had been planned.

"You give me," went on the other, "an opportunity of saying what has long been in my mind. You know, Don Luis, that many of my countrymen are not friendly to the North Americans. I do not share the prejudice."

Vickers bowed in his most florid manner.

"I felt sure of that, sir, when you did me the honor of accepting my invitation for this evening."

"Yes," said the other thoughtfully, "the acceptance was as significant as the invitation itself."

The phrase struck Vickers disagreeably, but he bowed again, and prepared to move away, but the old man stopped him.

"I was glad it should be so, Don Luis," he said. "There is no one to whom I should more trustfully confide my daughter's future. I am sufficiently Americanized to believe that marriages of the heart are the best marriages. My wife cries out for a man of our own country, but I say, 'No, let the hearts of our children speak.' I do not mind telling you that the heart of the little Rosita *has* spoken. Her mother has not the pleasure to know you, Don Luis, but we must alter that, we must alter that." He smiled up at Vickers and perhaps

saw something written upon his countenance, for he added hastily:

“Perhaps I mistake your sentiments. I have been warned that it is the habit of your countrymen to engage a young lady’s affections and to ride away. But I can not think that of you, my friend. I can not believe that I have mistaken your sentiments.”

“Oh, my sentiments,—not a bit,” said Vickers hastily. Even in English he might have found himself at a loss for the right word in which to decline an offer of marriage, but in Spanish, well as he knew the language, he floundered hopelessly. “My sentiments are as I told you, that the señorita is the most adorable young lady in the world, but——”

“Enough, enough, my young friend,” said his companion, laying a hand for an instant on Vickers’s arm with an incomparable gesture. “Obstacles are for old heads, love for young ones. See, she glances in our direc-

tion. She perhaps guesses what is the only topic that would keep you from her. Go to her. I will not be cruel. Go to her." And he turned away, waving his hand.

Vickers sprang after him, but as he did so he felt his arm caught, and turning saw Doctor Nuñez.

"I must see you alone for an instant, but at once," he said, in a low tone.

"More trouble!" said Vickers, leading the way to his old bedroom, which was the only spot in the house secure from the inroads of the party. He shut the door behind them, and invited the doctor to sit down, but Nuñez did not notice the suggestion.

"I have just come from town," he said. "Your immediate arrest is decided on. The police may be here in a few minutes."

"My arrest? Well, what the— Why in thunder am I to be arrested?"

"On suspicion of conspiring against the

government. You are thought to have great influence with the men, which, taken in conjunction with your friendship for Cortez, makes you dangerous."

"Well, if that isn't the darndest," said Vickers. "I have not conspired against their old government."

"That, my dear Luis," said the doctor gravely, "has nothing whatsoever to do with it. They are coming to arrest you. The mere presence of Cortez in the house will be enough. They can not arrest him without precipitating immediate trouble, but they can arrest any one who will be of assistance to him. It seems he has boasted openly that he could get all the ammunition he wanted from you. I do not say I believe it."

"I have just sent all the cartridges he wanted out to the *coche* which is at this moment standing before my door," said Vickers.

"Then you must certainly go at once."

"Do you really advise me, Doctor, to run away from a couple of policemen with handcuffs and a warrant? No, no, I shall stay. My conscience is clear. I shall appeal to my own government. You know they can't go about arresting innocent Americans without getting into trouble."

Núñez raised his eyebrows. "And through whom will you appeal? Your American consul?"

"I suppose so."

"And do you happen to remember the last time you saw Meester B. Wilkins Smith?"

"Oh, thunder!" returned Vickers, "that was the time I dipped him in the San Pedro, for saying I cheated at cards. Well, he richly deserved it, Doctor. No one could deny that."

"Perhaps not," returned the doctor, "but I do not think he will break his neck to save you. I think he will write home that it is un-



fortunate that a better type of Americans do not come down here. I think he will think it right to let our law take its course."

Vickers had begun to look grave, but at the word law his face brightened. "Ah, there you are,—law!" he cried. "They can not prove anything against me. They will not dare to ventilate their case in court."

"I do not think they will try," replied Nuñez gently. "I think they will send you down to a little prison on the island of Santa Maria, while they investigate your case. And I do not think, my dear Don Luis, that you will ever come back from that little island. A lovely spot, a paradise, but not healthy, it seems. It is very far away,—so far that sometimes the jailers forget to come to feed the prisoners for months at a time."

"Well, in that case," said Vickers, with a laugh, "I should think the prisoners would

not have very much trouble in making their escape."

"Not the least; they do not have the least, not the least little bit. But the channel is broad there, and the sharks are very hungry, Don Luis."

"Gee, you are a cheerful companion! You put new life in a man, don't you?" said Vickers.

"You must go, and go at once."

"I suppose," he answered, "that I might slip over the border for a day or two."

"You would be sent back at once. We have a treaty with our neighbors, and it is strictly kept,—especially in regard to those they have no interest in protecting. You must go home, Don Luis. You can catch to-morrow morning's steamer, if you are quick."

For the first time the countenance of Vickers really clouded. "I can't go home," he said; and then, noting the surprise on the doctor's

face, he burst out: "Why, Heaven help you, don't you suppose I would have gone home long ago, if I could? Did you think I was here for love of the damned country?"

"I did," returned the other simply. "Yes, I am not ashamed to admit that I did. I find my country beautiful,—my countrymen attaching. I believed that you felt it too."

"And so I do, so I do," said Vickers, "but, man, I'm a northerner, and I'd give every palm and orchid in the place for the noise of wheels creaking on packed snow."

"All the more reason, then, why you should go home."

"Look here, my friend," the other answered, "if I go home I run a fair chance of being electrocuted. If I stay here the sharks get me, or if I escape the sharks, the Señor Don Papa is going to marry me to Rosita. There are three uncomfortable alternatives for a man to choose from."

"I should choose electrocution," said the doctor.

"I think I shall choose a pot shot at the police."

There was a moment of silence, then the doctor asked,

"Did you send that letter to Lee's family?"

Vickers shook his head absently.

"Then," cried the other, with decision, "you shall go home as Lee. Ten years might change a man so that not even his own father would know him,—especially ten years in this climate. Beside, there was a resemblance, you know."

Vickers had lifted his head to laugh at the project for its impossibility, and paused to listen further, attracted by its sheer folly.

"You must have observed," the doctor continued, "that fugitives are caught for the simple reason they go into a new country as

strangers, and strangers are always objects of suspicion. Strangers always are called upon to give an account of themselves; strangers always have to explain why they have come. Now all these difficulties are obviated if only you can take up the life and personality of some one else. You are Lee, you go home to see your father. Nothing could be simpler. Well, yes, I admit that there is a risk, but——”

“But,” said Vickers, “there is also a Nellie. I told you, didn’t I, Doctor, that it is a name I am fond of?”

“It is a risk,” Nuñez went on, “but to stay here is a certainty.”

“To go back,” murmured Vickers, “to a real home, even if it belongs to another man, and a father, and above all an affectionate cousin——”

“Order your horse,” said Nuñez, “and I’ll take care of your guests, and of the police,

and of Rosita, and Cortez, and all the other follies you have committed.”

“And of Ascencion,” Vickers added. “She is worth all the rest, the nice old hag. Well, I’ll try it, Doctor, on your advice. By the way, thank you for not asking why I don’t go home under my own name.”

The doctor smiled. “We learn not to ask that question of our visitors,” he said; and then at Vickers’s request he went and routed out a small boy and gave orders to bring the *patron’s* mare at once to the front of the house.

When he returned to the bedroom, Vickers had changed into his riding clothes, and was stuffing a pair of saddle-bags.

“I want you, Nuñez,” he said, “to take anything you have a fancy for in the house, and give the rest to Ascencion. There’s a check for her, and here’s another for all I have in the bank. It will more than pay my

bills. If not, write me to an address I will send. Be kind to Ascencion. She won't like my going off like this, without saying good-by, but I don't dare. She will have hysterics, as sure as Fate. Tell her I love her fond. Good-by, Doctor."

The last Nuñez saw of him was a long leg quickly drawn over the window-sill.

The night, fortunately, was fair, for the rainy season had not regularly set in. As Vickers rode, he thought neither of the dangers he had left behind nor of the risk before him. It seemed as if the fierce homesickness of the last five years had suddenly broken out now and that his face was for the first time turned northward. He could not believe that within a week he would see the tops of New York's tall buildings rise over the horizon like an immense castle set on a hill.

He reached the sea at four o'clock; at sunrise the vessel sailed. Then only, as he saw

the gray water opening out between him and the shore, he felt an emotion of gratitude to the country that had sheltered him and which he never expected to see again.



### Chapter III

**E**VERY one knows that there are palaces in Fifth Avenue which contain no one of social note, while there are houses no wider than step ladders in the side streets for admission to which one would give one's eyeteeth. The Lees' was of this type.

At ten o'clock on the evening of the twenty-second, the groom came out of the area gate. He knew, and the Lees knew, that no one would be going home for an hour, but he obeyed his orders to be on hand at that time in order to open the carriage doors, and generally speed the parting guest. He had already unrolled the red carpet down the entire length of the steps, and was walking up and down, debating whether he could squeeze in

another five minutes for an extra plate of ice-cream (the cook was his aunt), when his attention was attracted to an approaching figure. It was that of a tall man in not ill fitting blue serge clothes, but, though the month was March, and a cold March at that, he seemed to feel no embarrassment over the fact that he wore a Panama hat of large, of almost blatant, variety. The groom counted up—at least two months before such a head-gear was even permissible. He had never supposed that such ignorant human beings existed.

At this point his scorn was changed to surprise by observing that the barbarian was actually ascending the Lees' step, treading lightly upon the red carpet. The butler opened the door promptly with smiling grace. He had observed Miss Lewis among the guests, and knew her maid—a vivacious Frenchwoman. His manner grew sterner when a

stranger in a Panama hat asked for Mr. Lee. His gaze, starting at the Panama hat, sank slowly to the newcomer's feet, noting on the way the pair of saddle-bags so casually held.

"Mr. Lee is entertaining friends at dinner," he said coldly.

"Still eating at ten o'clock?" returned the stranger.

"No, sir. The gentlemen have just joined the ladies in the drawing-room."

"Tell Mr. Lee I should like to see him," said the other, and stepped, without invitation, inside the door. Plimpton, who in the natural course of his profession had become something of a judge of men, looked at the stranger critically, and came to the conclusion he was not a thief. Further than this he refused to go.

"What name shall I say?" he inquired, and was confirmed in his fears when the stranger answered,

"No name. Say I have a message from his son."

Plimpton bowed very slightly. Be sure he knew all about the scandal about Mr. Robert. His curiosity was so much aroused that a weaker man would have mounted the stairs with a quickened tread. Not Plimpton. He rose grandly from step to step like a swimmer breasting slow waves.

Arrived at the top, he stood a minute in the doorway, fixing his employer with his eye, as one who would say, "Yes, it is true that I have important news, but do not be alarmed; you are in safe hands."

The next moment he was herding Mr. Lee downstairs like a faithful sheep-dog.

Mr. Lee paused two steps from the bottom, and stood looking down at the newcomer. He was a tall man, and the two steps gave him extra height, so that in his close evening clothes he appeared almost gigantic.

"You wished to see me, sir?" he said politely.

"You have a son in South America, Mr. Lee?"

The old man bowed.

"A man about my age and height?"

"Not quite so tall, I think, sir."

Vickers was silent. He had hoped the suggestion would be sufficient. He looked at the old man steadily. There was no recognition in the eyes. Vickers felt half tempted to throw over the whole game. It was indeed a mad one. He contemplated reporting the death of Lee, and going away. Then something in the face of Plimpton, peering over his master's shoulder, encouraged him. Plimpton had guessed. Plimpton would believe him. He hazarded a bold stroke.

"Don't you know me, father?"

The old man caught hold of him with a cry.

"My dear Robert! My dear son! To think of my not knowing you. But how you have changed! You have changed immensely."

"Ten years do change a fellow."

"Ten years, my boy? You keep no count. It will be twelve in June."

Even at seventy Mr. Lee must have retained some love of the dramatic, for he insisted on taking Vickers upstairs, and entered the drawing-room leaning on his arm, and saying suavely,

"Ladies, I want to introduce my son to you."

Vickers had been away from home for seven years, and in that time the highest type of feminine beauty which he had seen had been little round-faced Rosita, with her coarse muslins and cotton lace. And now he suddenly found himself the center of interest to a group of half a dozen women, to whose

natural beauty care, taste, fashion, and money had added everything that could adorn. Their soft shining dresses, their pretty necks and arms, their endless jewels dazzled him. He thought of his own little party—of Ascencion's efforts, of the phonograph, of the macaw.

The room, too, was incredibly warm and bright and luxurious in his eyes. The Lees prided themselves on its simplicity. It was more of a library, Nellie always said, than a drawing-room. But on Vickers, who had lived seven years with tiled floors and stucco walls, the dark red hangings, the shaded lamps, the books, the heavy rugs, made a profound impression.

Even in the first excitement, his prudence and his curiosity alike suggested the importance of at once discovering the identity of Nellie. His eye fell on Mrs. Raikes, sleek, dark, well bred as a fox terrier. She was the

most cordial of the little group. Again his glance turned to an exuberant blonde, who stood with large blue eyes fixed upon him. Every man has it in him to admire an exuberant blonde. He wondered rather hopefully if it could be she.

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Lee," Mrs. Raikes was saying. "I had heard of you, but I had begun to think you were mythical, like King Arthur."

"Why not say like all great heroes?"

The little group of women about him smiled. Only, he noticed the men stood apart—the men, and one girl, who had never moved from a sofa in the corner.

Vickers turned and looked at her, and as he did so, Mrs. Raikes exclaimed:

"What a shame it is! We have monopolized him so that his own cousin has not had a chance to speak to him. Come, Nellie, we'll make room for you."



Thus challenged Nellie rose very slowly, and Vickers's eyes rested on her long slim figure, and immobile little face.

"Why did not you cable, Bob?" she said.

He had on his voyage home imagined every possible sort of meeting between them—meetings which ranged from frenzied reproaches to caresses, but he had not imagined just this.

Even the rest of the company seemed to feel it was an inadequate greeting to a cousin who had been away twelve years, and they turned with some amusement to catch Vickers's answer.

"I did not cable," he said good-temperedly, "because I had neither the time nor the price."

There seemed to be no answer to this, and Nellie attempted none. Her eyebrows went up a little, and she returned to her sofa. Mrs. Raikes hastily followed her to say good-night.

"I suppose we must leave you to a family reunion," she said, and added, lowering her voice: "Such a nice prodigal, Nellie. If I were you, I should fall in love with him at once."

Nellie's eyes dwelt on her cousin with an amusement worse than anger. "I don't think I shall ever fall in love with Bob," she answered, and Emmons, who was sitting beside her, could not repress a slight sniff of contempt.

Mrs. Raikes approached her host.

"Good-night, Mr. Lee. Thank you for such a pleasant after-dinner surprise. Good-night, Mr. Robert Lee. Will you come and dine with me some night? I always keep a fatted calf on hand."

Vickers laughed. "Don't you think I'll get it at home?" he asked.

"Well, you know, Nellie is the house-keeper." They both glanced at the girl's im-

passive countenance, and smiled at each other. They, at least, were going to be friends.

Even after the guests were gone, and the three stood alone on the hearth-rug, Nellie remained silent.

Vickers could not resist saying lightly:

"You don't seem very glad to see me, Nellie."

"On the contrary," she answered, with meaning. "Don't sit up too late talking to Bob, Uncle Robert," and with the curtest of nods she was gone.

He turned to Mr. Lee and observed with some bitterness that Nellie's manner was not very cordial.

The old man shook his head. "No," he said; "I was afraid you would notice it. You must not expect too much of Nellie. She is a good girl, but she has not a warm heart."

"She has an attractive face," said Vickers.

It was after midnight before Vickers found

himself alone; he had sent the servants to bed, and was standing a minute in the act of turning out the lights. Plimpton had shown him—as one who bestows the freedom of the city—where the switch was to be found.

His brain still reeled with the success of his venture—a new name, a northern home, an affectionate old father, and—above all—New York under so friendly a guise. He was no reader of the social items in the newspapers. Names which had become familiar to half the country meant nothing to him; but there had been something about the people he had seen that evening which could not be mistaken by a man of any perception—a certain elegance and courage which together make the faults and virtues of good society. He had never in his wildest dreams imagined Nellie a woman of this type. He had hoped she would be pretty, but he hardly knew whether or not he was pleased to find this cool, perfectly ap-

pointed creature, with a full face like a boy, and a profile like an Italian saint. What bonds or barriers were there between them? And if such existed, was he ever to know them? He thought of her letter. "If it was on my account that you went, you need not have gone." What did it mean? Had there been coquetry on her part? Had there been brutality on Lee's?

And as he wondered he looked up and found himself face to face with her.

She had changed her elaborate evening dress for a scarcely less elaborate dressing-gown. She came in, sat down opposite him, crossed her legs, showing a pair of red-heeled bedroom slippers, and said briskly,

"Well, Bob?"

He attempted to respond with a smile that should be as non-committal as her words, but finding that she continued to stare at him he said,

"You were not very cordial in your greeting, Nellie."

At this she laughed as if he were making the best joke in the world, and as if she were most fittingly replying to it when she said, "Ah, but you see I was so surprised."

"Did not you know that I would come back?"

"So little that I can still hardly realize it."

Again the doubt crossed his mind whether or not she believed in his identity with her cousin.

"It is incomprehensible to me why you did come," she went on reflectively.

He answered truthfully: "Because I wanted to. Heavens, how I wanted to!"

"I am glad to hear it," she returned. "I am glad you acted on a whim rather than from a belated sense of duty, for otherwise it might seem rather ungracious for me to say what I am going to say."

There was something slightly sinister in her tone, but his curiosity had reached such a point that he forgot to be alarmed.

"Go on," he said.

"I have done your work for twelve years, Bob, and I don't mean to do it another instant."

"Done my work?"

She went on with the utmost deliberation. She made not the smallest emotional appeal. Vickers had never heard a woman speak more calmly.

"I see that you think that I ought to have been grateful for a home. I wasn't grateful. I have worked my passage. It was not desire for a home that has kept me here year after year, but a thing perhaps you don't know very much about, Bob—a sense of duty. At this moment I have no idea whether your father is a ruined man, or whether his mind is slightly unhinged on the subject of money.

He will not cut down the household in the smallest particular, and yet there are times when I can not get enough money from him to pay the servants' wages. It is not an easy task, Bob, and such as it is I make it over to you."

He glanced at the room—at her own extravagant clothes.

"Do you mean to say—" he began, but she interrupted him.

"Don't pretend to be surprised. As if I had not written to you often enough, as long as I had any hope you would come back."

"I never got your letters."

"Odd, for you always cashed my checks."

Vickers was silent. His experiment began to look less promising. It irked him inexpressibly to be obliged to bear such a tone from any one, more especially a woman. If Lee's villainy had been on a larger scale he could have supported it better.



"You have got to stay at home, Bob," she said firmly.

He could not help smiling. "It does not sound so alarming," he answered.

"You don't suppose I meant stay and be idle?" she asked. "No, we don't think idleness agrees very well with you, Bob. You are beginning work on Monday."

Her tone as well as her words irritated him. "I shall begin to look for something to do," he said gravely. "And perhaps I shall find something to help the family resources out."

"You need not look about. Your place is waiting for you. Mr. Emmons has very kindly offered to make you a clerk in his office."

He laughed. "I think I can do a little better than that," he said.

"You are hardly in a position to choose. The family resources have had enough of

your higher finance, Bob. You must take what is offered to you."

"It does not attract me—to be Mr. Emmons's clerk."

"I am sorry to hear it, but you must do as I tell you, remember."

"Nellie," he said, standing in front of the elegant and autocratic creature, "does it occur to you that a man may change in twelve years?"

"It does not seem to me that you are essentially different, unless perhaps in your appearance, which I really think has improved a little."

"Thanks for the compliment. But I am changed to this extent—you can not dictate to me as you seem to imagine you can. I shall work, because I happen to prefer it, but I shall work how, when, and for whom I please."

She shook her head and smiled. "How

like you that is, Bob—to imagine that fine talking will help you. You will have to do as I say.”

“If you were a man I should call that a threat.”

“Oh, it is a threat. Don’t you understand of what?”

“No.”

“That if you make any effort to shirk the clerkship—if you don’t behave well in it, even—I shall have you arrested.”

Vickers, who had just sunk into a chair, appreciating that the conversation was likely to be a long one, sprang up. Did she then know his story? Had she recognized him from the first? He made no effort to conceal that her threat alarmed him.

“Arrested for what?” he asked.

“For stealing everything that I had in the world, Bob,” she returned almost conversationally.

## Chapter IV

**I**T was a long time since Vickers had spent a sleepless night—a night, that is, on which he had designed to slumber,—but now, in the little mahogany bed something too short for him, he tossed all night. Contempt was a sentiment he was not accustomed to inspiring, and it sat very ill upon him. Fear, dislike, and even distrust he had had occasion to deal with, but contempt he had never, to his knowledge, had to brook. His good looks and his ready tongue had gained him an easy sort of admiration from women. His great bodily strength had enabled him to insist on a certain civility even from his enemies. Indeed, he had an almost childish belief in the efficacy of physical force.

He had been born and bred in a country town in the northern part of the State of New York, near where his father and his grandfather had been gentlemen farmers. He had gained, too early, a reputation in the neighborhood, as a good sport, and the best amateur boxer in the countryside. He had, besides, a certain social prestige, for his father's family had once been very rich and very much respected. A new town, a lake, a street, all bore the name of Vickers; and, though this had been over for a generation, some legend of greatness still lingered about the name.

It was all the worst possible training for a man of his temperament. His father sent him off—a little too late—to study scientific agriculture at a neighboring university. After three years Vickers was expelled owing to some trouble over a boxing-match. This was the beginning of his quarrel with his father, who could not stand seeing the name of

Vickers in the newspapers—particularly in connection with what he preferred to call prize-fighting.

The two men had struggled on together in spite of constant disagreements, until Vickers's final catastrophe had put an end to the situation. His father did not support him even in this, and Vickers had not been surprised to hear that when the older man died, a few years later, he had left his little property to a niece and nephew.

Lewis Vickers had left his native town by night—a fugitive, and yet a certain glory had still attached to him. He had none of the bitterness to look back to that slights and small insults bring to a man. Never in all his life had he been spoken to and looked at as Nellie had looked at him and spoken to him the evening before. His blood was poisoned at the recollection. It was an insult he could not wipe out—an insult, moreover, delivered

by a woman,—a creature he had been in the habit of subduing with a glance.

It did not take all night to bring him to his resolution. Risk or no risk, he would tell her the truth. He would explain to her that he was not the poor wretch she took him for.

He could wish, of course, that, to make his revenge complete, a year or so had gone by, during which time she and the forlorn old man would have lived upon his bounty. This would be perfect; but in the meantime he expected to derive a sufficient amount of satisfaction from her expression when she realized that he was a total stranger. Having reached this conclusion, he fell asleep, only to be wakened by Plimpton.

Plimpton, though he had now spent many years in America, had not sloughed off his British tradition. The eldest son was the eldest son. Scandal or no scandal, he respected the heir of the house. He pulled up

the shade and drew aside the curtains with the air of one performing a religious rite.

"If you would leave me your keys, sir, before you go out, I would unpack your trunks as soon as they come."

Vickers watched him. "Plimpton," he said, "I have no trunk."

He was very much mistaken if he had expected any expression of surprise from Plimpton. He had duly unpacked the saddle-bags and knew their meager contents by heart, but he made no comment. He merely bowed.

"No," Vickers went on, "I have no bag, but in that belt, Plimpton, which I notice you are regarding with so much disfavor, is some four hundred dollars in American gold. I am just making up my mind to go out and spend it all upon my back if I knew where to go."

Here Plimpton felt he *could* be of use. He had not valeted some of the best-dressed



men in London and New York for nothing. He instantly named a tailor.

"And for immediate use, sir," he added, as he hung the blue serge trousers over a chair, brushed beyond their deserts, "for immediate use I think you might find something that would fit you at Hooks's. I should not recommend it for most gentlemen, but with a figure like yours, sir——"

"Thanks, Plimpton."

"And will you breakfast downstairs or here, sir?"

"Where does Mr. Lee breakfast?"

"Not before noon, in his room, sir."

"And Miss Nellie?"

"Miss Lee, sir" (Vickers noted the reproof), "breakfasts in the dining-room at nine."

"I will breakfast in the dining-room at nine," said Vickers, and sprang out of bed.

When he came downstairs, she was already

at table, sitting imperturbably behind the high silver coffee urn.

“Good-morning, Bob,” she said, as calmly as if they had parted on the best of terms; “I hope you slept.”

Vickers was still conscious of the excitement of his situation—the strange room, the silver, the pretty woman opposite him.

“Thank you,” he said, “I slept something horrid. My temper was only restored by Plimpton. Plimpton is much the nicest person in the house. He admires my figure.”

“Really,” said Nellie, and took up the morning paper.

Vickers let her read in silence—he had enough to occupy his thoughts; but when he had finished, and Plimpton had disappeared for good, he rose and, standing against the mantelpiece, looked down at her and said:

“Could you give me a few minutes of your time and attention, Miss Lee? At least I

suppose your name is Lee. Plimpton says so."

His address succeeded in making her look up. "Plimpton says my name is Lee? Do you need to be told? Are we crazy?"

"We are not crazy, though one of us is rather sadly mistaken," he answered. "You did not talk last night in a way to invite confidence, Miss Lee. Far be it from me to criticise your social manner, but I can not help thinking that you were not at your best. You were annoyed, and you had the misfortune to make me angry, too. Angry as I was, however, I can see on thinking it over that you must have had a hard time,—so hard that any man would be glad to give you a helping hand, and that, within limits, I am prepared to do."

Nellie had stopped eating, and was now leaning back in her chair with something of the manner of the first row at a new drama.

"You will, will you, Bob? You are extremely kind," she answered, with twinkling eyes.

"I am," said Vickers. "I am most extraordinarily and unnecessarily magnanimous: for, as I suppose you knew from the moment you set eyes on me, I am not your cousin."

There was an instant in which he made ready for consequences, and then, to his surprise, she began to smile, and then to chuckle, and then to laugh in the most disconcerting way imaginable.

Vickers would not interrupt her merriment, but continued to stare at her with what dignity he could command.

"You are so delightful, Bob. You always live up to your character. I have been wondering all night how you would get out of this, and I decided on ill-health. Heart-disease, I rather thought. It seemed an excellent opportunity for heart-disease. You could

easily arrange doctor's bills that would run far beyond anything you could make. But I did you injustice, grave injustice; this is infinitely better. You are not you, but some one else. And were you changed at birth? or in South America?"

Disregarding her merriment, he went on:

"Nevertheless I am willing to stay here, and give my time and attention to your uncle's affairs if they need it, and to contribute my share to the household expenses. There is no reason in the world why I should do this, except for the fact that I rather like you. I'm sure I don't know why: for a more disagreeable, sharp-tongued young woman I never met. Still, the fact remains: I do like you. But I make one condition—not a very hard one—namely. that you shall be decently civil to me. Do you understand?"

"I understand perfectly," she answered.

"We are to accept your doing your duty as

the most extraordinary personal favor. Is that it, Bob?"

"An unkind critic might say you were willing to shift your burdens to the shoulders of the first stranger that came along, whether he were your cousin or not."

"The critic would to a certain extent be right. I do not particularly care who looks out for my uncle, provided it is well done. But you must not be too hard on me, Bob," she smiled. "You will not have the burden of my support: for I expect to be married in August."

"Well, may I be damned!" cried Vickers, striking the mantelpiece with his hand. "This is too much. It was just conceivable that I might be such an idiot as to stay here and help you out, even on your own absurd terms; but to stay on while you go off and marry another fellow——"

"It is your staying that makes it possible

for me to be married," put in Nellie gently.

"Then regard it as impossible: for I won't stay."

"If you attempt to go, Bob, I shall have you arrested." Her tone might have made him pause, if he had not been so full of his own wrongs.

"What folly this all is!" he cried angrily.

"I make you a most magnificently generous offer, and you have not even the sense to accept it. I, a total stranger, offer to take up—but it serves me right for trying to talk business to a woman. Who is this friend whose clerk I am to be? Who's your lawyer? Is there a man anywhere in this situation to whom I can talk a little common-sense?"

"Mr. Overton is my uncle's lawyer, but I should not advise you to see him, Bob. I have heard him express his opinion. He has always thought it would have been wiser to send you to the penitentiary at once. It is

Mr. Emmons who is willing to give you a position. You had better see him."

"All right, I'll go to see him, and if I don't like the way he talks, I shan't come back. In that case, good-by. I have to thank you for a very pleasant evening. Remember me to Plimpton."

Nellie had again bent her head over the paper, and did not concern herself greatly over these adieux.

"We dine at eight, Bob," she said.

"Oh, deuce take you!" answered Vickers, and almost shook his fist at her as he left the room.

He had as yet no fear that the situation had passed beyond his control, but she had succeeded in rousing an unusual degree of irritation in him. He thought he would experience relief in talking to a man to whom he could say what he liked.

Emmons had rooms in one of the upper



stories of an uptown club. It was a short walk from the Lees', and Vickers arrived at the entrance in a couple of minutes, but there was a long delay before he was shown to Emmons's apartment.

He found Emmons seated at his writing table.

"Good-morning, Lee," he said rather magnificently, and Vickers recognized him as the man who had been at Nellie's side the evening before.

"Mr. Emmons," said Lee, sitting down without being asked, "I think you witnessed my triumphant return to the bosom of my family last evening. I find myself in something of a hole on account of a foolish trick. For reasons which we need not go into, I passed myself off as Mr. Lee's son, on the strength of a likeness. Unhappily I had no idea of just what sort of a rascal he appears to have been."

Nature or art had made it easy for Emmons's face to express nothing.

"And you are not Bob Lee?" he said.

"Lee died the day before I left South America."

"Why have you come to tell *me* this?"

"I found myself rather in need of a dispassionate outsider, and Miss Lee mentioned your name."

"Well," said Emmons, "you've come to the wrong person. I am not a dispassionate outsider. I have known the Lees for some time, and have watched Miss Lee, and I know some of the difficulties she has had. There have been times, sir, when your father would not give her a penny for months together—and why? Because all spare cash went down to you. It was a dog's life for any woman, but she would not give it up, until there was some one to take her place. She and I have waited one whole year, hoping

we could lay our hands on you, and now that you have at last walked into the trap of your own accord we are not going to let you go."

"I see," said Vickers, "that like her all you want is some one to take the job of looking after the old man. I had no idea it would be to your interest, too, to disbelieve me."

"To disbelieve you!" cried Emmons. "Do you expect any one in their senses to believe you? Does a man not know his own son, or a girl not recognize the cousin she was brought up with? You acknowledge that you come from the same place, you are the same age, the same height, you walk straight to his house, and it is not until you find that your being Lee means that you have got to work for your living that you begin to run in this story about your being some one else. No, sir. You will do as I tell you, or you will be arrested as you go out of here. Miss Lee telephoned me what your last game was, and

I sent round to police headquarters for a detective. You can take your choice."

Vickers was silent. He walked to the window and looked out at the city which lay like a spider's web, far below him. He was a quick-tempered man, and had had his moment of feeling that personal violence was the only possible answer to Emmons, but the seriousness of the decision served to calm him. If he had had only the personal risk to consider, he would probably have gone. Twice in his life he had escaped the arm of the law. He did not doubt he could do it again. Indeed, there was something tempting in the mere idea. But his soul rebelled at running away from the whole situation—from the whole situation, and Nellie. He gave no name to the strange mixture of admiration and antagonism which she aroused in him, but he found no difficulty in giving a name to his feeling for Emmons. He would have wished to stay

merely to put a spoke in his wheel. And what did it commit him to—to stay a day, or a week? He could always disappear the moment the situation became irksome. There was no obligation involved to Emmons certainly. If *he* chose to leave him day after day in the same house with his *fiancée*——

Ever afterward the sight of a city spread out below him brought the decision of that morning back to him.

“Well,” he said finally, “I’ll stay for the present.”

“I thought you would. We’ll go downtown now. And by the way, while we are on the subject, I wish to say that we can not have you running up bills in your father’s name. In old times there was money to pay them. Now there does not seem to be. I’ll get my hat.”

Left alone, Vickers turned from the window.

“ It serves me right,” he thought; “ I ought to have stayed and had it out with Cortez. Ah, Rosita, Rosita, your face was round and empty like the moon, but you would not have got a fellow in a fix like this.”

## Chapter V

**I**T had always been Vickers's boast that he had never worked for any one but his own father, and, as he usually added, not very long for him. To find himself sitting on a high stool in a dark office, copying Emmons's letters for him, struck him as supremely ridiculous. In South America he had been a person of some importance, and the contrast amused, even while it annoyed him.

The work was not hard, but the hours, he noticed, were long. It was after six, on this first day, before he reached home. The sound of voices in the drawing-room warned him of visitors, and, like the true home-coming American, he stole quietly upstairs to his own room.

About seven, Plimpton knocked on his door, to say that Miss Lee would be glad to speak to him for a few minutes in the drawing-room, before dinner.

Vickers was an optimist. A thousand agreeable possibilities occurred to him. He dressed quickly—he had had time for a little shopping on his way uptown, and was able to appear in the conventional evening dress of the Anglo-Saxon.

He found Nellie occupied with some flowers which had just come for her in the long pink pasteboard box of a New York florist. She was clipping the stems and arranging them in a tall vase.

“Oh, Bob,” she said, without turning from her occupation, and the charm of her pose contrasted oddly with her tone, “I wanted to warn you not to trouble your father with this idea of your being some one else. It would probably destroy his returning faith in you,



and I don't think he would even get the amusement from it that I did."

"Ah, he has not such a sense of humor as that merry fellow Emmons. You did not tell me it was he whom my absence has kept you from for a year. No wonder you resented it!"

"I always think," Nellie observed with the utmost detachment, "that a person who is not very strong in morals ought to have particularly good taste to make up. I don't think your last remark was conspicuous for either."

"My dear Nellie," said Vickers, "if I had promised to marry Emmons, I should never hear the word taste again without a blush."

"We won't discuss Mr. Emmons."

"Discuss my revered employer with an outsider? I should think not," returned Vickers.

"At least he *is* your employer, which not many men who knew your record would care to be."

"Ah, but Emmons doesn't know *my* record."

"Really, Bob, you are tiresome," said Nellie. "Do I show so much evidence of believing you that you are encouraged to persist in your absurd story? There is a proverb about sticking to a good lie, but no one could advise you to stick to such a particularly stupid one as this."

"Facts are stubborn things, however," said Vickers. "Lee, if you care to know, died just ten days ago. I saw him dead. He died of drink. Doesn't that sound likely?"

"Very likely, if I did not see you before me at the moment."

"Don't be absurd," he answered, coming nearer to her. "I knew Lee. We were not even so very much alike. He was not as tall as I am, for one thing. Look at me."

"I can't. I'm busy."

"By George, you will, too," he cried, tak-

ing her by the shoulders. "You did not have to look up as much as that to Lee. He was not built like me—not so well. He was older, too, and had led the devil of a life, and showed it. Can't you see, you stupid girl? Look at me;" and he gave her a faint shake.

She was not in the least flustered, angered, or in any way upset by his violence, apparently. She simply would not look at him. Her eyes roved up and down and sideways, but would not meet his, and in the course of their wanderings they encountered the figure of Mr. Lee, just entering.

"Isn't dinner ready yet, Nellie?" he asked peevishly.

"Not yet, Uncle," said Nellie, coolly escaping from Vickers's grasp. "Sit down here. Bob was just asking me if I did not think him very much altered in twelve years."

The old man looked at Vickers affectionately. "Why, no," he said, "I don't think he

has changed as much as I should expect."

"Why, sir, you did not know me at first last night."

"No, not just at first, though I suspected, I suspected. But your manner of speaking is different. But as I look at you now I find you wonderfully little changed. Just bring me that picture of him when he was a boy, Nellie."

Nellie obeyed with alacrity, and returned with a faded photograph in a magnificent silver and enamel frame. It represented a stout little boy in Highland costume, in which Vickers could not see the smallest resemblance to himself. The old man, however, regarded it with tender, almost tearful eyes. "Truly the boy is father to the man," he said. "Just the same expression, isn't it?"

Vickers turned away with an exclamation of irritation which he could not repress, and Nellie asked maliciously,

"You do not find Bob any taller than he was when he went away, do you, Uncle?"

"Taller, Nellie? Why, of course not. Men don't grow after they are twenty-three or four. What are you thinking of? He has filled out a good deal. That gives him an appearance of greater size. Sit down here, my boy. Nellie tells me you insisted on going to work at once. I suppose that is right, but I must admit I was a little disappointed. I had hoped for one day of your society."

During dinner the conversation was carried on chiefly between the two men.

Before they rose from the table, Plimpton approached Vickers to say that Mrs. Raikes had telephoned to ask if Mr. Robert Lee would dine with her the next evening at eight. Vickers replied that Mr. Robert Lee would be graciously minded to do so, and was delighted to see a shade of some sort settle on Nellie's brow.

The dinner was the first of many—not only with Mrs. Raikes, but with other people. Indeed Vickers had—what is so rare in a large city like New York—a sudden and conspicuous social success. He was good-looking, he was amusing, he did not care very much what he said, or whether he were liked or not, and the result was that he had more invitations than he could accept. It was the first of April, and that short, pleasant spring season that New York social life has lately known, had set in. The winter was over, many people had gone away, but a small group of those left behind drew closer together and felt a rare impulse to be intimate. The Park was turning green, the country clubs were pleasant objects for motor trips,—altogether there was a good deal of an agreeable and informal nature to be done, and all of it Lee was asked to share.

The strange feature of it all was that there

was a general understanding that Nellie and her cousin were not upon cordial terms, and that they could not both be asked on the same party. The result was that Nellie spent more time at home alone than she was accustomed to.

Mr. Lee, who had always been absolutely unconscious where or how much Nellie went out, took the keenest interest in his son's comings and goings, and would often express to Nellie a pride in his popularity which she found rather hard to bear.

Emmons disapproved intensely.

"We have no right to foist a fellow like that on our friends, unless we are sure they know about his past."

"Every one does know, I think."

"They can't, or they would not ask him. Though I must say the sort of irresponsible man he is seems to me to stick out plainly enough."

"Does it?" said Nellie. "I don't think so. If I met Bob now for the first time, I think I might be inclined to like him."

The reply for some reason seemed to irritate Emmons. "Oh, then you approve of letting him loose on society," he said somewhat illogically.

"I don't know what I can do about it, James. I can not forbid him to accept invitations."

"I am not so sure," returned Emmons; "but one thing you certainly can do. You can move out of town. He will find it hard work to accept invitations in Hilltop, and we are justified, I think, in insisting that he shall come out there every night."

Nellie hesitated. "I could do that," she said, "and yet I hate to go so early to the country. I shall be very lonely at Hilltop, James."

"No," said Emmons, "for I have decided



to take a house there myself—the red one, I think, across the ravine from you.”

“Oh, that will be delightful,” said Nellie.

“Besides, you will need my help in keeping an eye on Bob. This way, he and I can go up and down to town together every day.”

“You are very good, James. You think of everything to save me trouble.”

Mr. Lee was delighted at the prospect of an early move to Hilltop. He and his forefathers had been born and bred there. He loved the place; he loved the ugly red brick and stone house which his father had built on high ground to replace the old farmhouse in the valley below. He loved the farm itself—the acres of rolling country spread out on the slopes.

And Vickers, too, was glad to go. A quiet countryside in spring promised happier opportunities for tête-à-têtes with Nellie than New York had afforded him. Every day in the

course of the past two weeks he had felt irked and humiliated by his position, and had been strongly tempted to slip away. Perhaps if escape had looked more difficult he would have been more likely to try it, but it was too easy to excite his interest. And, though it seemed always possible to him that the next day would be the last, his reasons for staying grew, without his realizing it, more and more powerful. Not only his feeling for Nellie held him—for indeed there were times when the prospect of putting her once and for all out of his life seemed very desirable to him,—but also old Mr. Lee's feeling for him. The old man had not commanded Vickers's attachment, hardly his respect. He was small-minded, irritable, petty, at times beyond endurance. He was ungrateful, almost unkind to Nellie, but there could be no doubt of his passionate, unqualified devotion to his only son. The one and only thing he cared for

was the well-being and companionship of the man he supposed to be his boy. The idea of the pain his going would inflict held Vickers more perhaps than anything else. The patience with which the old man hid his eagerness for the younger one's society, lest he should be a drag upon him, the amount of thought he devoted to Vickers's plans, the pride he took in Vickers's popularity were all inexpressibly touching to a man who had never been the object of parental tenderness.

When Nellie and Emmons and his clerkship were more than usually trying, Vickers would tell himself that the whole thing was absurd. Why should he stay for the sake of an old man who had no claim upon him whatsoever? And yet he stayed.

If he had felt the bond in New York he felt it twenty times more when they had moved to Hilltop.

They arrived at Hilltop about five in the

afternoon, and tired as he was, Mr. Lee insisted on walking out a little way over the farm to show it to his son. "It will all be yours, Bob, before long. To be sure, it does not pay as it used to, but it's a fine property."

Vickers cordially agreed; and even after Mr. Lee had gone back he continued his inspection. Vickers had been trained to farming. He had not been half an hour on the place before he realized that there was there a magnificent property badly if not actually dishonestly mismanaged. Mr. Lee was not a farmer, and had left his land entirely in the hands of his head-man. Vickers saw an opportunity for efficient work before him. This prospect held him, too. He came in very late for dinner, silent as a dog following a scent, quiet as a cat about to spring; abstracted, in short, as a practical man just before action.

It was with just this dogged energy that he

had made, as it were actually with his two hands, his cavalry squad in South America. There the problem had been only a practical one. Here a certain amount of information had first to be acquired. He wanted the farm accounts, and he got them, that first evening soon after dinner. He forgot everything else—forgot even that Nellie was sitting outside all by herself in a walled garden, lit by an April moon.

For two nights he sat up until sunrise, poring over the books. He had no other time to give to them, for his hours at the office were long. The second evening, hearing footsteps under the window, he looked out and saw Nellie pacing up and down, closely wrapped about in a thin light shawl, for the night was chilly. He wavered for a moment, and then went back to work. After all, this was something definite that could be done for her. The next evening he would take a holiday.

It was particularly annoying, therefore, when the next evening came, to find that it brought Emmons with it—and Emmons not a merely transient visitor, but a near neighbor very comfortably established not a mile away.

The three sat a little while together in the moonlight while Vickers wondered whether, if he showed no intention of leaving them alone, Emmons would grow discouraged and go home. The answer to his question came at once, for Emmons rose and said firmly that he had one or two things he would like to discuss with Nellie: would she come into the house? Nellie acceded without the least reluctance, and Vickers was left alone.

He took one or two impatient turns up and down the path. This, he said to himself, was just a little more than he proposed to stand. If he were willing, for Nellie's sake, to clerk in the daytime, and farm at twilight, and

figure at night, he would not in between times play third to her and her *fiancé*.

Then suddenly the recollection came to him of a girl he had met at Mrs. Raikes's—a young and pretty creature, with the soft yet assured manner of the American girl who has been educated in a French convent. Surely that girl had told him she spent her summers at Hilltop. There had been some talk of his coming to see her. If only he could remember her name.

A supreme effort of memory brought it to him—Overton. That was it. She had seemed a nice little thing. He would go and see Miss Overton.

As he went through the hall, Nellie's voice called to him from a neighboring room—"Bob."

He came and stood in the doorway. The lovers were seated at a discreet distance. Emmons had paused like a man interrupted in

the midst of a sentence. Vickers felt convinced that he had been "laying down the law."

"If you are going out, Bob, please be sure to come home before half-past ten. My uncle is so easily disturbed."

Vickers looked at her reflectively, debating whether if he were late she would wait up, for the pleasure of scolding him. But there was nothing encouraging in her manner, and to be let in by Plimpton would hardly be rewarding.



## Chapter VI

**H**E was unprepared for the size and magnificence of the Overton house. If he had been an older resident of Hilltop, he would have known that to visit the daughter of Balby Overton was a thing not to be done unadvisedly or lightly. It was an occasion to be dressed for, and mentioned afterward, with a casualness only apparent.

But Vickers knew nothing of this,—only knew that a pretty girl had asked him to visit her, and that an evening had soon presented itself when he found it convenient to go. Nor would he, for his nature lacked reverence, have been very much impressed at knowing that Overton was thought a great man in the neighborhood. He had begun life like all

the other men in Hilltop, had skated and swum in the river with the rest, had gone to school with the other boys, and had not, as they delighted to remember, been very wise or very industrious. Afterward he had studied law and then gone into a law-office in the nearest large town. From that moment he had begun to rise; so that the old conservative firm which had consented to receive him as a clerk was now generally spoken of as "Overton's partners." He was considered the first lawyer in the state, and spoken of as the next senator. He was known, too, to have made money.

And yet he had never moved away from Hilltop. Hilltop itself expected it, and waited anxiously for the first symptom; waited to hear him complain of the heat of summer, or the exigencies of his daughter's education. He never spoke of either. Perhaps political reasons chained him, or perhaps he was not

above enjoying the position of a big man in a small place, or possibly he was bound by an affection for the neighborhood where he was born and bred. In any case, he built himself a new house, and an anomalous being, whose position Hilltop never clearly understood, came and laid out the grounds—a “*landscape* gardener” was understood to be his official title. Hilltop on the whole disapproved of him. He planted strange trees, and they asked each other why it was, “if Balby wanted trees so bad, he didn’t build his house down in the woods.”

But Overton himself remained unchanged—unchanged at least as far as any one could judge. He still came to town meetings and quarreled with Dr. Briggs just as he had always done. It is true that certain people who had always called him “Balby,” or even “Scrawny” (for he was thin), began now to let slip an occasional “Mr. Overton,” but

he still took the 8.12 train in the morning, and the 5.37 in the afternoon; his daughter still went among them like all the other daughters of Hilltop; and if he had not had a big house, and strange, obscure, but very expensive objects understood to be "first editions," no one could have laid a finger on any alteration in him.

Vickers did not, of course, know anything of all this, did not notice the impressive gate, or the iron palings, or anything until a large stone house loomed up before him in the moonlight. Then, after he had rung the bell, he turned to look at the view, and as he withdrew his eyes from the soft shadowy rolling country, he saw that in the foreground was a long marble balustrade, and beyond this, marble seats and fountains that stood out sharply against a background of cedars.

The servant who answered the door said that Miss Overton was on the piazza, and

led the way to the back of the house, where Vickers found that he had been anticipated by two young men, who were sitting on the steps of the piazza, looking up at the girl in her low wicker chair. It struck Vickers that the conversation had languished, for there was a decided pause as he approached. But this illusion was dispelled by Miss Overton's greeting, which was so markedly constrained, so totally different from the manner in which she had invited him to come, that Vickers did not need much perception to guess that she had been warned he was not a desirable acquaintance.

He did not allow that knowledge, however, to chill his pleasant manner. He took his place on the steps, although there were a number of luxurious looking chairs standing about. He was punctiliously introduced to both of the young men, and he remarked at once that it was very kind in Miss Overton

to let him come, as he seemed to be in the way at home.

"Oh, I suppose Mr. Emmons was there," said Miss Overton; and it presently appeared that Miss Overton did not think Mr. Emmons half good enough for Nellie. One of the young men said rather gruffly that he did not think so either, and was greeted by so many sly giggles and innuendoes that Vickers gathered that he too had had pretensions in this direction.

Vickers contented himself by remarking that Emmons did not seem to him a romantic figure, and Miss Overton burst out:

"And Nellie of all people, who might have married so many nice men."

"The deuce you say," cried Vickers, and was rewarded for his interest by hearing all the gossip of Nellie's love-affairs for the last six years.

He turned to Miss Overton. "And why

did not Nellie accept any of these eligible proposals?" he asked.

There was a short but awkward pause, and then Miss Overton replied in a low voice that she understood Nellie did not feel she could leave her uncle.

The answer, though not painful for the reason they thought, was nevertheless painful to Vickers. It seemed to set a new obstacle between him and Nellie. A woman might forgive you for overworking her, even for robbing her, but for coming between her and a man she fancied—never. No wonder he had not found it easy to establish pleasant relations with her. The task looked harder than ever.

He had no difficulty in thawing little Miss Overton's manner. She was a type he understood better. She giggled so delightedly every time he opened his mouth, that he felt emboldened to stay even after the two young

men had risen together. As soon as they had gone the former constraint returned to the girl's manner. She asked stiffly:

"Do you find Hilltop much changed, Mr. Lee?"

"I find myself changed," answered Vickers. He had no intention of losing any of the advantages of his position, nor was he going until he had drawn her back to a more friendly tone. "You see I have been living among another people. Did it ever strike you, Miss Overton, what is the distinguishing trait of the Anglo-Saxon race?"

Miss Overton, who was not quite sure what the Anglo-Saxon race was, answered that it had not.

"Why, their ability to pick out another person's duty. Ever since I've been here every one has been telling me what my duty is—except you."

"But isn't that a help, sometimes, Mr.



Lee?" the girl asked shyly. She had heard that her visitor was sometimes in need of a little advice in this matter.

"Ah, but how do they know my duty, Miss Overton? They all think they do; but do they? There are so many different kinds of duty, just as there are so many different kinds of virtue."

"But are there many?" asked Miss Overton, trying to think how many she had learned there were at school. Was it nine virtues, or nine Muses? She was sure about the seven deadly sins.

"Oh, all sorts and kinds. I had a servant once in Central America, who was the kindest little chap to animals. When my macaw was ill, he insisted on sitting up all night with it, and yet I found out afterward that just before he came to me he had murdered his mother and grandmother, because he said they nagged him."

"What an interesting life you must have had, Mr. Lee," said the girl, for this casual mention of crimes was startling to Hilltop notions.

"And courage is a queer thing," Vickers went on; "I knew a native down there who cried when an American knocked him down, and yet when it came to sheer crazy courage——"

Just at this moment a tall figure came through the window.

"What a beautiful night," said a quiet voice.

"Father, this is Mr. Lee," said the girl, and there was a something anxious, almost appealing, in her tone.

The anxiety seemed unnecessary, for Overton answered pleasantly: "What, Bob Lee? glad to see you here!" As he spoke he stepped out into the moonlight, and Vickers saw his long, thin, clever Yankee face. "Just going?" he went on, glancing at his guest,

who as a matter of fact had no such intention.

"I'll walk a little way with you."

Vickers was surprised at the Great Man's cordiality, but his surprise was short-lived. Indeed it lasted no further than the corner of the piazza.

"I always think, Mr. Lee," Overton began at once, "that if a disagreeable thing has to be said, the sooner the better. Now I hope you will come and see me again, come and see me as often as you feel like it; but I do not desire your friendship for my daughter."

In his day Vickers had knocked men down for less, but there was something so calm and friendly and reasonable in Overton's manner that it never occurred to him to do more than ask quite mildly:

"And why this difference, sir?"

"Oh," said Overton, "I allow myself a great many things I don't permit Louisa—whiskey and cigars, and acquaintances with

reformed characters. I assume that you have reformed, Mr. Lee, or else you would not have come to see us at all."

"There is something very frank about the way you assume that I needed to," retorted Vickers.

"I make it a point even in court," said Overton, "not to dispute the obvious."

It struck Vickers that there was no use in resenting insults to a past with which he was so little connected that he was in complete ignorance of its dark places. Hoping to throw a little light upon the subject he began:

"Perhaps you will tell which incident or incidents of my past you——"

Overton cut him short with a smile. "No," he said, "I won't. In the first place I don't mean to walk so far, and in the second it wouldn't be pertinent. The point is that you are a reformed character. In my experience there is nothing so dangerous to the

young. Their admiration for the superb spectacle of Satan trodden underfoot is too apt to include an admiration of Satan himself. In short, my dear sir, I don't think you have any ground for quarreling with me because I think you a dangerous fellow for young girls."

"It is not exactly a compliment," said Vickers.

"Either of those young sparks who have just gone would have given ten years of his life for such an accusation." Both men laughed at the incontestable truth of this assertion, but Vickers felt it necessary to say:

"But I am a good deal older than they are."

"And a good many other things as well." They had reached the impressive gate-post, and Overton stopped. "Suppose you come and dine with me to-morrow night," and he added, in exactly the same tone, "Louisa is dining with a friend."

Vickers looked at him a moment and then exclaimed candidly: "Now I wonder why I thunder you asked me to dinner."

Overton smiled. "Let me tell you," he answered. "I must confess I was an eaves-dropper this evening. Sitting in the house I could hear your voice, and I amused myself trying to guess who you could be that I could not place in Hilltop. I could not even guess your family. It was principally to satisfy my curiosity that I came out."

"Do you remember me, Mr. Overton, before I went away?" asked Vickers eagerly.

"I have an excellent memory," answered the lawyer briefly.

"Do I seem to you to have changed?"

"Physically changed, you mean?"

"Yes."

Overton looked at him reflectively in the moonlight.

"More than physically," he returned at length.

"Mentally?"

"Mentally, if you like. It seems to me, Lee, that you have changed your soul, and you will forgive my saying that it seems to me a damned good thing. Good-night."

Vickers went on his way whistling. The interview had raised his spirits with its suggestion that his own personality might yet triumph over Lee's. It seemed a very fitting climax to the evening, when he saw Nellie standing at the door, most evidently looking for him.

"Ah, Nellie," he said, "you were afraid I had bolted."

"I was not," she answered firmly; "only I did not want to lock up the house, until you were in."

"Nellie," he said again, "you were most mortally afraid in the depths of that hard

little heart of yours that I had run away."

"I don't know whether I am most afraid you will run away, or disgrace us by staying. Where have you been, Bob?"

Vickers looked down at her and felt inclined to refuse her the information, but seeing possibilities in telling her, he almost instantly answered:

"I have been most safely engaged in a visit to Miss Overton."

"Louisa Overton? Oh, Bob, how could you?"

"But why not? I had supposed it one of the very most respectable——"

"You know that is not what I meant."

"Perhaps you will tell me what you do mean."

"You must not go and see little Louisa. She is a perfect child. She has seen nothing, and knows no one. I do not think she would even amuse you very much, Bob. She is too



simple and innocent. I can not think what put it into your head to go."

"Well, one thing was that she asked me."

"You must not go again."

"I can hardly avoid it. I am dining there to-morrow night."

"She *asked* you to dinner?"

"Certainly I did not invite myself."

There was a short pause, and then Nellie said, with determination: "Bob, I am to a certain degree responsible for your being here at all."

"You are entirely responsible."

"I feel the responsibility. I feel it is my duty to make you behave rightly while you are here. It is not behaving rightly to try and acquire an influence over an inexperienced child like Louisa Overton."

"My dear Nellie, how women jump to conclusions! Is an evening visit a sure prelude to acquiring an influence?"

"Yes, for a man like you."

"Be careful, or I shall interpret that as a compliment, if you don't change the form of your sentence."

"You may interpret it as you like," returned she. "I repeat that it is quite possible that your looks, your size, your manner, and your adventures might be very dazzling to a girl, who," she added relentlessly, "did not know much about you."

"But every one here seems to know everything about me, to judge by their disapproving glances."

"I don't believe that Louisa does. But I tell you frankly, Bob, if you go there again——"

"Another threat, Nellie? I never knew any one who believed so completely in government by threat."

"How else can I treat you?"

"Well, you might try being a little bit nice

to me. Don't you think that would be rather more likely to make me stay at home? But to be left alone in the garden, while you and Emmons——”

“You do not need to be told that you were at liberty to join us.”

“Ay, there's a prospect to keep a man at home. Three of us, so congenial, sitting up making conversation. A dangerously alluring proposition, Nellie, upon my word!”

“You can hardly expect me to refuse to see Mr. Emmons because you have come home.”

“I do not say what I expect: I ask you to be a little more civil to me. I don't make it a business proposition, and I don't make it a threat, like you; but if you really want me to stay at home, and behave myself, there is only one way to do it.”

Nellie looked very grave and then began to smile.

"You know that sounds rather like a threat to me," she said.

"Then you see the force of bad example. I did not use to threaten my friends."

"I am not your friend," she answered quickly.

"What are you?"

If he had expected to hear her reply "your enemy," he was wrong.

"It seems to me that for six years I have been your slave——"

"I wish I had known it."

"And now I intend that you shall be mine."

He laughed. "Well, you are frank, at least. But let me tell you that it has never been found good commercial policy to treat even slaves too badly. Your whole position is based on the assumption that I shall always prefer this house to State's Prison. But be careful. There is many a good criminal whom I should prefer to Emmons as a com-

panion, and a warder is tender and human compared to you, Nellie. Have a little common sense, my dear girl. If I am to stay, you must be civil."

She turned sharply away from him, and he made no effort to detain her. They walked side by side across the hall, absorbed in their own thoughts. Nellie's were obvious. She was plainly weighing the claims of an excellent *fiancé* against those of a worthless cousin. Vickers was asking himself, for the first time, whether, after all, he any longer wanted to prove to her that he was not Lee. If he had the proofs in his hand at that moment, would he show them to her? There would be one splendid scene, one instant of triumph. It would be worth a great deal to see Nellie humble; but would it be worth going away for all time? He had to choose between leaving her, a rehabilitated character, or at least partially rehabilitated, but still leaving

her; or remaining to be despised. It struck him with some force that on the whole he preferred to remain.

It was at best a very pretty question.

## Chapter VII

**W**HEN Vickers came downstairs ready to start for Mr. Overton's, Emmons was just arriving to dine at the Lees'. The two men met at the front door. Emmons eyed Vickers suspiciously. Evidently he and Nellie had had some discussion as to the advisability of allowing the renegade as much liberty as evening visits implied. Indeed, the little man almost blocked Vickers's path for a moment.

"Going out?" he asked.

"Going to dine with a friend," returned Vickers. The reply made Emmons curious. In the first place he did not approve of Vickers's roaming over the country by moonlight; in the second there were few people in Hill-

top who would receive Bob Lee into their houses. Perhaps it was not so much curiosity as distrust that was aroused in him. On reviewing the situation he simply did not believe a word, a state of mind his manner did not entirely conceal.

"I am sure it is very nice to see you making friends so quickly," he said.

"Oh, I usually make friends quickly, if at all. And the same way with enemies. As I am a little late," he added, with the utmost geniality, "perhaps you will just step aside and let me go."

Reluctantly Emmons allowed the other to pass, but as he did so, he hazarded one more question.

"Going far?" he said.

Vickers did not answer. He was some distance down the path, and possibly did not hear; but it is irritating to be left with an unanswered question on your lips, and Emmons



came storming in to Nellie, who was standing in the hall.

"Where is he going, Nellie? I don't think we are justified in letting him loose on the countryside—a man like that."

Nellie was watching Vickers's back as he swung out of sight, and she returned rather absently, "He is dining at the Overtons'." She did not at first observe the expression of surprise and annoyance that appeared upon the face of her betrothed.

"The *Overtons*!" he exclaimed.

Now we all know that strangely petty ambitions are laid away in the minds of even the greatest; and Emmons had always cherished a secret wish to be on terms of intimacy with Overton, whom he often described as the "ablest man in New England." But, though the compliment must necessarily have been repeated, it had never won for its inventor the cordiality which it deserved.

"To the Overtons'," he repeated. "Well, you will excuse my saying that seems to be about the most extraordinary thing I ever heard."

"Does it?" returned Nellie. "It doesn't to me. People like Bob are such a rarity in Hilltop."

Emmons glanced at her to see what in the world she could mean, and not being very much the wiser for his glance, answered contemptuously: "A rarity! Fortunately."

Nellie appeared to be willing to take up the subject from a thoughtful and scientific standpoint.

"I don't know that I think it fortunate," she replied. "It does not seem to me that the absence of fine-looking, amusing young men is a matter for any community to congratulate itself upon."

It would have been impossible, of course, that any girl with a profile like Nellie's should

wish deliberately to annoy another human being—least of all a thoroughly domesticated *fiancé*. Certainly such an idea never occurred to Emmons, and yet none the less he found himself distinctly irritated.

“I hardly think you would find the community improved by changing men like Dr. Briggs and the Reverend Mr. Fowler for men of the type of your cousin.”

Nellie laughed. “I only suggested that Mr. Overton would find them more amusing at dinner,” she said.

“I think,” said Emmons, “that you are talking without thinking.”

She seemed at any rate quite willing to think without talking, and a pause fell upon the conversation. It was almost with relief that they heard the sound of the village fire-bell break in upon the silence. *Ding-dong, ding-dong*—a regular, terrible sound of warning, almost like a human voice calling for help

in the darkness. Nellie started up. The sound brought recollections of old tragedies. Fire seldom visited Hilltop, but when it came the little town was almost helpless. Emmons rose, too, but more slowly. They went to the door and listened.

Already the quiet night was full of the sounds of shouting and hurrying feet, and then the tinkle of the little hand fire-machine. The fire was at some distance, for the tinkling grew fainter and fainter, and finally died away entirely.

"Oh, let's go, James," said Nellie.

A man may be pardoned for not wishing to take his *fiancée* to one of the few situations where he can not shine. Emmons shook his head, pouting out his lips slightly.

"Oh, I don't think you want to go, my dear. It's a long way off and the dew is heavy."

"Yes, but I do," said Nellie. She opened

the coat closet, and began hunting for an old cloak.

"It's probably nothing at all—a false alarm," he continued; but seeing that she persisted—and she could be very persistent when she wanted to—he added: "Oh, very well; I'll go up to the corner of the road, and if it is anything worth seeing, I'll come back for you."

Left alone, Nellie sat down on the steps of the front piazza and waited. Now that Emmons had gone so meekly, her conscience began to reproach her for her treatment of him throughout the evening. No wonder he disapproved of Bob. He was quite right to do so; she disapproved of him, herself. Yet, the result of a day's effort to be, as he had asked, a little more civil had rendered him more civil in return. Even if one did disapprove of a man's morals, one could not help noticing the extraordinary quickness with

which he caught one's ideas and anticipated one's wishes. He never shut his eyes and repeated the same thing in exactly the same tone of voice—a trick of Emmons's which for the first time she noticed annoyed her excessively. It was in the small things that Bob was so considerate of her feelings; and yet there was something ludicrous in talking about a man's consideration for her feelings when he had stolen her patrimony before she had put up her hair.

At this point she began to appreciate that Emmons had had more than time not only to run, but to walk, to the corner of the road and back. She went down to the gate, and looked up the road. There was no sign of him. He had been right then. It was only a false alarm. And then to contradict this hypothesis she saw the heavens suddenly lit up with the unmistakable glare of a conflagration.

Emmons had played her false.

Nellie did not hesitate an instant. She started out by herself.

Guided first by the glare in the sky and soon by the sound of shouting, she cut across fields. Before long she came in sight of the fire. It was in the barn of a neighboring farmer. She could see the people crowding about it, and the thick rolling smoke that turned the full moon to a dull reddish brown.

Coming up from the darkness she was unnoticed. Every one was watching the flames, except those who were trying to put them out. The first person she saw was Vickers. His coat was off, and from the rather dangerous eminence of a woodpile he was playing the hose upon the roof of a neighboring stable. Among the lookers on, she observed Overton, and then the perfidious Emmons. She might be excused for a feeling of anger against her betrothed; and she was just approaching him in order to thank him for his consideration of

her wishes, when her attention was distracted. Vickers, who had come down from the wood-pile, was suddenly approached by a sobbing, expostulating child, the daughter of the farmer. She had evidently escaped from the parental supervision and had seized the knees of the first passer-by. Nellie saw Vickers stoop to listen, saw him lay down a bucket he had taken up, saw him hitch his trousers with a peculiarly energetic motion, and run toward the blazing building. Some one shouted to him, another caught his arm, and was shaken off. He disappeared into the blaze. An instant later he reappeared carrying a small bundle which turned out to be nothing more than a puppy.

A voice reached her ears in the pause that followed.

"Well, I would not risk my life for a dog." And Emmons's voice replied: "A pretty even risk. Bob Lee against a blind puppy."



The sentence fell coldly on Nellie's enthusiasm. Her heart beat quickly with something very like contempt for the speaker. Nearby, the child and the mother dog were holding a solemn thanksgiving, utterly indifferent to the excitement about them. Nellie preferred their society. She had had some thought of saying a word to her cousin, but something held her back. There seemed a sort of meanness in keeping herself aloof from him at home, and then stepping out to share his public triumphs.

As she moved back she found herself near Overton, who was talking to Mr. Fowler, the Presbyterian clergyman.

"The fellow's as wild as a hawk, Fowler," Overton was saying, "and yet I rather like him."

"It was a brave action," returned the clergyman dubiously.

"Aye," said Overton, noting the hesita-

tion; "a good many of the brave actions of this world have been done by those the church damned in the next."

"I think," answered the clergyman tartly, "that it takes some courage to be merely good, Mr. Overton. Morality is a kind of courage."

Overton laughed. "I'm not so sure of that," he said; "but I rather think courage is a kind of morality."

The sentence impressed itself on Nellie's mind. She admired Mr. Overton, and was accustomed to give attention to anything he said. Of course, courage was a kind of morality—Bob's kind—not so difficult and praiseworthy as a steady industry, like James Emmons's; but, oh, so much more interesting!

She amused herself listening to the different comments on her cousin's action. She noticed, for the first time, how such unlikely phrases as "the young fool," or "well, if

that isn't the darndest," could be made to express a very poignant form of masculine admiration. She chuckled softly to herself: "it certainly was the darndest," she repeated, deriving no little pleasure from the unaccustomed form of words.

The barn was now seen to be doomed. The flames burst out of the roof, licking it up. There was nothing more to do, except to keep neighboring buildings wet, and as there was no wind the danger to these was not great.

Seeing Mr. Overton standing alone, Nellie drew near to him to ask if the loss of the farmer was serious.

No, Overton thought not. The barn was old, and fortunately there was no live-stock in it. "Except," he added with his crooked Yankee smile, "that puppy your cousin pulled out."

"I am afraid Bob was very foolhardy," Nellie replied, not quite ingenuously.

Overton laughed. "Why, so they are all saying," he answered. "But I don't know. The little girl says she had promised the old bitch to preserve one puppy when all the others were drowned. A lady's promise is a sacred thing, isn't it, Miss Nellie? Oughtn't a gentleman to risk his life to help her keep her word of honor?" He looked at her whimsically.

"I don't think a gentleman need trouble himself to do anything that you don't do, Mr. Overton," she answered, "and I notice you did not rush in."

"I? Oh, dear no. I am too old and stiff, but if I had been a romantic young giant of twenty-eight or nine——"

"You flatter him," said Nellie dryly. "Bob is thirty-five."

Overton looked at her gravely. "Impossible," he said. "But of course you know. All I can say is that he is the youngest-looking

man for his age that I know. I must ask him how he manages it."

"Perhaps by avoiding all his responsibilities," said Nellie, and regretted her speech the next instant. Her position was really absurd. She seemed to be equally annoyed at those who praised her cousin and at those who blamed him. Whatever was said of him stirred her to contradiction.

The lights and shadows cast by the fire were very sharp, so that Nellie, standing behind Overton, was almost invisible when a little later Vickers himself came up.

He was quite hoarse with shouting, and was enjoying himself immensely.

"It's a fine sight," said Overton.

"What? Oh, yes, bully. I've had the time of my life. But I am afraid it's almost over."

Nellie moved forward. She had not forgotten Emmons's perfidy, and she said:

"Will you tell me when you are going, Bob? I should like to go home with you."

"You here, Nellie? Of course I'll take you home any time you say. Has Emmons deserted you? I thought I saw him here earlier."

"Yes, I saw him, too, looking on."

"The same occupation he was engaged in when I saw him. In fact of all natural-born, first-rate spectators——"

She thought Overton need not have laughed, and she said, "Bob, if you can not speak civilly of Mr. Emmons——"

"There, there, I'll not say another word. Where is my coat? Are you ready? Let's be getting along. Shall we go by the road or across lots?"

Nellie chose to return as she had come. She was glad that he did not wait to be thanked, and slipped off without any notion of being missed.

They walked in silence through alternate patches of woods and moonlight. Occasionally he would offer a friendly hand to help her over a fence, but Nellie did not accept it. She had climbed fences unaided all her life. A strange impression of loneliness crept over her. She listened with a certain breathlessness to the quiet of the woods. Even the moonlight looked different; and then she realized that she had not often seen the full moon so high.

Her companion, too, was unusually silent, and it was she who spoke first. "Bob," she said suddenly, "why did you risk your life for a dog?"

"Oh, Lord!" cried Vickers, "if any one else asks me that—! Every one seems to think I had a plan. I didn't. The kid asked me to, and it seemed to be up to me. I quite forgot I was risking your precious salary. It would have been a good joke to send you

home my corpse to pay the funeral expenses—the funeral expenses of a total stranger.”

“Perhaps it would not have been a very expensive funeral, Bob,” she answered dryly.

He was irrepressible, however.

“That would have been a shame, for we gave your cousin a splendid blow-out—a camellia wreath! You ought to have seen it,—equal to the best artificial. Oh, Nellie,” he went on, “you don’t know how the idea of your following my remains to the grave touches me. Would you wear mourning for me, Nellie?”

She would not smile. “Yes,” she said gravely. “But only because I should not wish to hurt my uncle’s feelings.”

“And would it be for me, or my two hundred dollars a month, that you mourned?”

“Entirely for the two hundred.”

“Then mourn for it now, you cold-hearted girl,” he answered, vaulting lightly over a



fence beside which they had been walking; and grinning teasingly at her from the other side, he added, "I've had enough of it and of you. Good-night. Good-by."

Nellie caught his arm in both her hands, and held it with all her strength.

"I'll call for help, Bob. Be careful. No, no, you shan't slip through my fingers."

"Do you really suppose you could hold me, my dear Nellie?" he asked, looking down at her, and touching for an instant the two hands on his coat-sleeve with his large hand.

For all answer Nellie lifted up her voice and sent as loud a call as she could achieve into the empty night.

"Oh, they'll never hear that," said Vickers, "let me do it for you," and he shouted loudly: "Help, help, help! She's holding me against my will. Won't somebody remove this terrible young woman? Help!"

Nellie could not resist smiling at his ob-

vious enjoyment of the noise he was making. "How silly you are, Bob!" she said. Perhaps she unconsciously relaxed her grip, for the next instant he had wrenched himself free, and retreating a few paces, addressed her from a safe distance.

"Shall I really go, Nellie? Good-by to the old house and poor Emmons, and to you and our inspiriting little scraps. Well, I rather think so. Don't be so sharp with the next victim—that's my parting word. Good-by!"

He waved his hand lightly and set off across a moonlit field toward the woods on the other side.

Nellie did not hesitate an instant; she climbed the fence and followed him with all the speed of a long and active pair of legs. Once in the shadow of the woods, however, he was pleased to pause—to disappear into the darkness to reappear at her elbow, to lean

out and speak in her ear from behind a sheltering tree-trunk.

At last, seeing that she was getting exhausted without having the smallest intention of giving in, he stopped of his own accord, and leaning his back against a tree, shook his head at her.

"Aren't you ashamed, Miss Nellie," he said, "to be out playing tag with an utter stranger at this hour of the night? What would Mr. Emmons say if he knew it? I'm surprised at you. Come home directly." (He tucked her hand under his arm.) "You ought to have been in bed two hours ago."

And Nellie, somewhat bewildered, but very tired, allowed herself to be led home.

## Chapter VIII

**E**MMONS stopped at the Lee house the next morning on his way to the train. Vickers, fortunately, had already left. Emons came in reality to explain, but like so many of us, he made the mistake of thinking that his explanation would be strengthened by a little reproach.

“Well,” he said, “I came to find out whether you got home safely. I was really alarmed, Nellie, when I heard you had been at the fire after all. I don’t at all like the idea of your running about the country by yourself after nightfall.”

“I don’t think there was much danger, James.”

“You don’t? Let me tell you we are all

very much afraid something dreadful happened after the fire. Several of us heard hideous screams in the direction of Simm's woods."

"What did you do?"

"We went there, of course, but we could not find anything. They ceased in as mysterious a way as they began. Some of the men went out at sunrise to-day to search the woods. I have not heard whether they found anything. But you will see the folly of imagining a place safe just because you have always lived there. I have been anxious all night. I kept imagining it might be you——"

"Bob took me home," she answered quickly.

"Well, as long as you're safe that's all I care about. I just stopped in," he ended, moving slowly down the steps, but at the foot he could not resist adding:

"I suppose you saw that grandstand play of your cousin's?"

"Yes."

"And what *did* you think of it?"

He looked at her insisting on an answer, and after a moment got it:

"I thought, James, that you would never have done anything so foolish."

"I most certainly would not," he returned; and he had walked as far as the corner before it struck him that as an answer it was not entirely satisfactory, but it seemed too late to go back.

Later in the morning she had a visit from Louisa Overton, who drove over from her own house, in her umbrella-topped phaeton with the bay cobs which her father had so carefully selected for her. She came, as she explained, to welcome her dear Nellie, but her dear Nellie noted with uneasiness the unusual promptitude of the visit. There could

not, of course, be the smallest chance of seeing Bob at that hour, but Nellie's heart sank as she observed how often her cousin's name was introduced into the conversation. It seemed to grow up spontaneously like a weed, and yet Nellie was sufficiently experienced in the peculiarities of her own sex to know it was a danger-signal. She wondered if the time had come for delivering the warning against her cousin which Emmons had advocated. She felt strangely adverse to delivering it.

She tried a new mode of attack as the girl rose to go, after a final comment on Vickers's conduct at the fire.

"Upon my word, Louisa," she said good-temperedly, "Bob seems to have made a most flattering impression on you."

Miss Overton smiled. "He is a charming person," she answered. "Apropos, Mrs. Raikes says that the three best things in the

world are a good novel, a muskmelon, and a handsome cousin."

"She has not the last, I am sure, or she would have learned to value it less highly," Nellie returned.

Miss Overton did not immediately answer. They had walked to the front door, and as she climbed into her trap, she observed that it was warm.

Nellie put up her hand to her face. It was warm. She hoped her own heightened color had not suggested Louisa's remark.

The heat, she could see, wore on her uncle. He looked older and frailer than ever. Even Vickers showed it after three almost sleepless nights; and Emmons's temper, she thought, was not quite as smooth as usual. He scolded her about Overton's manner to Bob. The great man had actually sought him out in the train and had been seen walking along the platform with a hand through his arm. Em-



mons thought it a mistake to show approval of such a person as Bob.

“ Really, I think you are a little too severe, James,” she answered; and all she could say for herself was that she showed less irritation than she felt. “ It seems hard if, as long as Bob is behaving well, he should be denied all human companionship.”

“ Oh, if you consider that Bob is entirely rehabilitated by two or three weeks without actual crime——”

Nellie turned away. She thought the heat was affecting her temper, too. Mr. Lee's slavish devotion and Emmons's continual criticism of her cousin alike angered her. She found herself wondering whether James were not rather a trying employer—whether he did not take it out of Bob down town. For the first time she felt a little sorry for her cousin. At least he never complained.

He did not complain, but a steady contempt

for Emmons grew in his mind—a contempt which would have been hatred, if he had really been as bound down as Emmons thought him. As it was, he still played daily with the idea of flight. Certainly, he told himself, he would wait no longer than to get the farm on its feet under a new farmer.

To make the situation more trying his friendship with Overton had not been without results. He and the great man had had several long talks over the farm and the condition of Mr. Lee's affairs. Overton had been impressed. The morning after Louisa's visit to Nellie, he had offered Vickers a position of some importance. The offer gave Vickers satisfaction. As the Lees' lawyer, Mr. Overton must know all about Bob Lee's past. Vickers felt that at last his own individuality had overcome Bob's. Nevertheless he had declined. The position would have taken him to another city. He saw that Overton was

puzzled and not very much pleased at his refusal.

"If the difficulty is with your father," he said gently, "I think I could arrange that for you."

Vickers said that it was not with his father, and Overton said no more. Vickers was sorry to see that he had lost ground.

He came up by a later train than usual. He felt put out with life and with himself, and stood frowning on the station platform looking for the trap that would take him to the house, when suddenly he saw that not the coachman, but Nellie, was driving it. For an instant his heart bounded. He looked round to see if Emmons were there, too. But few people patronized the late train. He was alone on the platform when Nellie drew up beside it.

"If any one had asked me in the train," he said, "what was the most unlikely thing

in the world, I should have answered 'that Nellie should come and meet me.' "

To his surprise she assented quite gravely. "I wanted to see you before you went home. There is a man at the house asking for you."

"What sort of a man?"

"A very queer-looking man, Bob,—an old man. He speaks very little English, and has very dangerous-looking eyes."

"What's his name?" said Vickers. He had begun to be nervous about Lee's past. He could not tell what was about to overtake him.

"He won't give his name. He just bows, and says to tell you a gentleman. He keeps calling you Don Luis, and then correcting himself and saying Meester Bob Lee."

"The deuce," said Vickers. He thought for a moment that the Señor Don Papa and the lovely Rosita had found him out. "Is he old?" he asked.

"Yes,—middle-aged, or more." Then see-

ing his obvious anxiety, Nellie went on quickly: "And so I thought, Bob, if it were anything very bad—I mean if you did not want to see him, that you might go on to Mr. Overton's, and I would tell him you had gone away."

"Tell a lie, Nellie?"

"Oh, don't be stupid and irritating, Bob. My uncle has not been well lately. He could not bear anything more. It is of him I am thinking. It would be too terrible, if, if——"

"If they juggled me at last. Well, I don't think that they will."

His light-heartedness did not entirely relieve her mind, and at their own gate she stopped again.

"Do be careful. Think before you go in, Bob," she said; and then, seeing him smiling, she added, "Oh, I almost wish you had never come back at all!"

"What!" he cried, "am I more trouble

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than the two hundred dollars a month is worth?"

"Yes," she answered crossly.

"Perhaps if you will tell that to Emmons, he will raise my salary."

She was not at all amused. "Bob," she said as she drew up before the door, "don't go in. I really do not feel as if I could bear another scandal. Don't be foolhardy. This man is terribly mysterious."

"Why, you excite my curiosity," he said, and gently putting her out of his path, he went into the house ahead of her and found himself confronted by Doctor Nuñez.

The ensuing conference was long. Dinner came and went; but still Vickers was shut up in the little library with his strange visitor. Mr. Lee had gone to bed, Emmons had long since arrived, but his *fiancée* gave him but a strained attention. She sat listening for the opening of the library door. If the voices

within were raised enough to become audible, she thought that a quarrel was in progress; if they sank, the silence terrified her more.

"Now some people like a straight southerly exposure," Emmons was saying, "but give me a southwesterly. You get the sun in——"

Nellie suddenly stood up. "What can they be doing?" she said. "That queer-looking man has been here over three hours."

"Up to no good, the two of them, I have no doubt," said Emmons, and added, "I hope you don't keep much money in the house."

She turned on him sharply. "How absurd you are, James. You can't suppose——" but she was cut short by the opening of the library door, and the sound of the two men's voices, as they crossed the hall.

"Do you know any Spanish, James?" she asked quickly.

Emmons shook his head.

"I speak no language but my own," he answered proudly.

As the front door shut, Nellie left him unceremoniously, and went out to the front piazza, where Vickers was standing after having said good-by to his visitor. His head was bent and his hands were in his pockets.

Nellie came and stood silently beside him. She was conscious of being nervous. She could feel her heart beating. She felt that something important had happened. They stood like this for several seconds, and then fearing that Emmons would join them before she had heard, Nellie said:

"Bob?"

The monosyllable was plainly a question, but he did not answer it. He merely took her hand and drew it within his arm and continued to stare meditatively at the boards at his feet.



Driven to desperation by the thought of the shortness of her time, Nellie at length asked:

“Was it very serious?”

He looked at her.

“Pretty serious, Nellie.”

She felt frightened.

“I don’t want to be too curious, but you must tell me. Are you in danger?”

“I am in danger,” he answered, “of the only thing which at the moment I fear. I am in danger of having to leave you.”

She withdrew her hand quickly, and stepped back. He made no effort to detain her.

“Yes,” he said, “go back to Emmons, or we shall have him ramping out here to know what the matter is. I am going up to the Overtons’.”

Nellie turned and went into the house.

Emmons was sitting with his elbows on his knees, tapping his feet up and down so as

to give a rocking motion to his whole body. He did not like being left alone.

"And where is Bob?" he asked.

"Gone out," and Nellie added more candidly: "Gone to the Overtons'."

"Oh, of course, naturally," retorted Emmons. "And may I ask who his visitor was?"

"He did not tell me."

"He has gone, I suppose, to confide it to Louisa Overton."

Nellie looked at him quickly. She had not phrased the notion quite so clearly to herself, and yet it had been there. Bob had never mentioned Louisa Overton's name, and yet his cousin could not be ignorant that he was at the Overtons' house almost every day. She glanced at James. Would any one turn to James in a crisis? She thought all this before she became aware that he was saying:

"I think we shall have to inquire into

this a little more. There is something behind these constant visits to the Overtons', if I am not very much mistaken. Why a clever man like Balby Overton allows it, is more than I can see. Is it possible that Miss Louisa can have taken a fancy to him? Is it possible that any decent girl could take a fancy to him?"

There was a long pause. Perhaps Nellie was not listening, for he had to repeat his question before he got an answer.

"Very possible, I should think."

The answer did not please Emmons.

"Well, not so very possible," he said contemptuously. "I am afraid the kind of man he is sticks out plainly enough. Inexperienced as she is, I fancy she can see his game—an heiress and so young. I should feel responsible if anything happened, unless I had said a word to Overton. Oh, yes, I know. You *suppose* that he knows all about Bob's record,

but in a case as serious as this we have no right to suppose. It is somebody's duty to speak plainly, and if you won't do it, why, I will."

"I am the person to do it, if it must be done," said Nellie.

"I am not so sure of that. There are very pertinent little incidents in your cousin's past which I hope you don't know, but which you certainly could not repeat."

"I know quite enough, I'm afraid," she answered, with a sigh.

"Oh, well, don't sigh over it," said Emmons. "If you feel so badly about it, I'll go myself."

"No," she returned firmly, "I will see Mr. Overton to-morrow. I promise you I will, James."

There was a short pause.

"Now about that bay-window," Emmons began; but glancing at his betrothed he was

surprised to observe tears in her eyes. She rose to her feet.

"Suppose you go home, James," she said not unkindly. "I feel tired. I think I'll go to bed."

"I can see that blackguard worries you," said Emmons; but he obeyed.

Yet strangely enough after his departure she did not go to bed, but sat on in the little parlor trying to read. But her chin was often raised from her book to listen for footsteps. At eleven she went upstairs, but she was still awake when after midnight she heard Vickers return.

## Chapter IX

**P**ROCRASTINATION is the thief of more than time;—it is only too often the thief of opportunity. Vickers, who knew very well that he might have made his escape any time in the course of the last month, if only he had been sure he wanted to, now saw before him the prospect of making a more hurried flight than suited his purpose. He had allowed himself to drift, had asked how the present situation was to end, without attempting any answer. And now he had to give an answer within a few days.

He found Overton in his library. Books, mostly in calf-skin covers, stood on shelves that ran almost to the ceiling. Overton was reading—not one of those heavy volumes, but a modern novel in a flaming cover.

“ Well, young man,” he said, looking up without surprise, for it was no longer unusual for Vickers to come in like this, “ I warn you that I am in a romantic mood. I don’t know that I care to talk to common, everyday mortals like you. I wish I had lived when men wore ruffles and a sword. Then you got romance at first hand.”

“ Well, I’ll tell you what it is, Balby G. Overton,” said Vickers, “ there is just one place you don’t want romance, and that is right here in your own life, and that is where I have got it at the moment, and I’ve come to you to help me get it out.”

“ You talk as if it were a bad tooth,” returned Overton.

“ Will you extract it? ”

The other smiled. “ Not a little of a lawyer’s business,” he said, “ is extracting romance from the lives of his clients.”

“ It’s a lawyer’s business, too, to know

when people are lying, and when they are telling the truth, isn't it? I hope so, for I am going to tell you a yarn which sounds uncommonly impossible."

"You encourage me to think it may be amusing."

Vickers laughed. "Well, it begins well," he said. "In the first place, I am not Bob Lee."

"Indeed," said Overton. "Let me congratulate you."

It was impossible to tell, from his tone, whether he believed the statement or not, and Vickers made no attempt to determine, but went on with his story.

He told, with a gravity unusual in him, of the death of Lee, and the incidents which had led him to assume the dead man's personality. When he had finished there was a pause. Overton smoked on without looking at him, until at last he observed:



"Vickers—I was once counsel for a railroad that had a station of that name, I think."

"Vickers's Crossing. It was called after my grandfather, Lemuel Vickers. The name is well known in the northern part of New York."

"But there is still one point not clear to me," said Overton. "Why is it that you did not come home under the interesting and well-known name of Vickers?"

"Is that really difficult for the legal mind to guess?"

But Overton would not guess. "A desire for change?" he suggested; "an attraction to the name of Lee?"

"The simple fact that I had committed a crime."

"Of which a jury acquitted you?"

"I had not sufficient confidence in the jury to leave it to them."

"What! You ran away?"

"I did."

"And what was the crime?"

"I had killed a man."

Nothing could be calmer than Overton's expression, but at this he raised his eyebrows.

"Murder?" he said, "manslaughter? homicide? With what intent?"

"With none. I did not mean to kill the fellow; I knocked him down in a good cause."

"A woman, of course."

"At the earnest entreaty of his wife, whom he was chasing round the room with a knife."

"And is it possible," said Overton, "that the juries in the northern part of the State of New York are so unchivalrous as to convict a man who kills in such circumstances?"

"So little did I suppose so," returned Vickers, "that I gave myself up as soon as I found the man was dead."

"But later you regretted having done so?"

"You bet I did. The lady in the case went on the stand and testified that my attack was unprovoked and murderous——"

"These people were your friends?"

"Well, the woman was."

"I understand. That made it more awkward."

"Oh, lots of things made it awkward. You see I had broken in a window when I heard her screams. Besides, every one wanted to know how I came to be passing along an unfrequented road at one o'clock in the morning. In short, I saw that there was only one thing for me to do, if I wanted to save my precious neck. I broke jail one night, and slipped over the Canadian border, and from there managed to get to Central America."

"You still had some friends left, I see," said Overton with a smile. "I suppose it is for legal advice that you have come to me."

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"No, you are wrong," answered Vickers. "I have not finished my story. I came north with a real desire to settle down—with a real enthusiasm for a northern home. I thought I should like to jolly an old father, and a pretty cousin, for the rest of my life."

"How did you know she was pretty?"

"Well, I wasn't mistaken, was I? But what happened? Lee turned out to be a rotten bad lot. I have been very much disappointed in Bob Lee, Mr. Overton. He is not a pleasant fellow to impersonate, I can tell you."

"His record is not a desirable one, I believe," answered the lawyer.

"I don't know whether you have heard that, among other things, he stole the small capital left to his cousin," Vickers went on.

"Yes, I have heard it rumored."

"As you may imagine, that did not help the home atmosphere. It did not tend to

make Nellie cordial. In fact, you must often have wondered at my indifference to your offers of better positions. Nellie had threatened to have me arrested as a thief if I should attempt to leave Hilltop; and though it would not have been very difficult to prove that I was not Lee, it would have been confoundedly awkward to defend myself as Vickers, and be extradited back to New York."

"Yes, it is a pretty predicament," said Overton, "but there are still some minor points I do not understand. For instance, I can't see any reason why you have not told your cousin—Miss Nellie, I mean—that you are not Lee."

"Why, I have. I did at once. She laughed in my face and intimated that I had always been an infernal liar. You see, one of the troubles is that as soon as I told them that I was Lee, every one remembered me perfectly. Why, sir, it was like a ray of

light when you said you found me changed. No one else did."

"I see," said Overton. "And now one thing more. Why didn't you bolt at once?"

"I've just told you."

"What, a threat of arrest? Hardly strong enough as a motive for a man like you. You have taken bigger risks than that, in your time. Why did you not take the chance now?"

Vickers paused, and a slight frown contracted his brow. "It would be hard to say—" he began, and stopped again. The two men looked at each other and Overton smiled.

"Might I offer a possible explanation?" he said.

"Oh, very well," returned Vickers. "Yes. I don't want to leave her. Is that so odd?"

"So natural that I guessed before you said it. You are, in fact, in love with her?"

"I suppose that is about what it amounts to," the other said; and added with more vigor, "and if I stay here another day, I shall do bodily violence to the man she is engaged to."

"In that case," remarked Overton dispassionately, "I advise you to go. Emmons is an honest, able little fellow, who will take care of her, and her life has not been an easy one."

"Don't say that to me," said Vickers; "the mere idea of his taking care of her sickens me. For that matter, I could take care of her myself."

"Possibly," said Overton, "but by your own showing you would have to choose your State."

Vickers rose and began to walk up and down the room. "Well," he observed at length, "if you advise me to go without even having heard the offer that tempts me—This

evening a very good old friend of mine turned up from Central America. It seems they have been having an election down there—an election which bears some resemblance to a revolution. A fellow called Cortez has been elected——”

“Odd,” murmured the lawyer. “I read the item in the paper, without the smallest interest.”

“I have known Cortez for some time, and served him once or twice. He sends up to offer me a generalship in his little army—a general of cavalry. But I must take Saturday’s steamer.”

“Plenty of time. This is only Monday.”

“Plenty of time—if I am going.”

“Is it a pretty uniform?”

“I tell you the offer tempts me,” retorted Vickers.

Overton rose, too. “My dear fellow,” he said, “of course you are going to accept it.



Heaven knows I shall be sorry to see you leave Hilltop, but no good will come of your staying. Go to-night—at once. Be on the safe side. Let me see.” He drew out his watch. “The last train has gone a few minutes since, on this road, but there is a branch about five miles from here that has a train about ten. You can catch that. Get into my trap, and I’ll drive you over there with one of my trotters.”

“Why the deuce should I go to-night?” said Vickers, stepping back as if to avoid Overton’s enthusiasm.

“The sooner the better. If you don’t go now, how do we know you will ever go?”

Vickers did not look at his friend. “At least,” he said, “I must go back to the house and get my things.”

“My dear man, she won’t be up at this time of night.”

“I don’t expect to see her. I don’t even

know that I want to see her again. But I must get some money and clothes. I won't trouble you. I'll walk the five miles." He moved toward the door.

Overton held out his hand. "Good-by," he said with a good deal of feeling.

"Good-by, sir," said Vickers, and he added: "By the way, did you believe that story of mine?"

"Yes," said Overton, "I did."

After the door closed, he repeated to himself: "Yes, by Jove, I did; but I wonder if I shan't think myself a damned fool in the morning."

But the processes of belief and disbelief are obscure, and Overton, so far from finding his confidence shaken, woke the next morning with a strong sense of the reality of Vickers's story; so strong, indeed, that he turned a little aside from his shortest road to the station in order to drive past the Lees' house,

and see if there were any signs of catastrophe there.

There were. Nellie was standing at the door, and though to the casual observer she might have seemed to be standing calmly, to Overton's eyes she betrayed a sort of tense anxiety. He pulled up.

"Anything wrong, Miss Nellie?"

"My uncle is ill—very ill, I'm afraid," she answered, and then, as he jumped out of his brougham and came to her side, she went on, "It's his heart. The doctor is not very hopeful."

"Dear! dear!" said Overton, "I am very sorry to hear that"; but inwardly he was wondering whether he had not advised Vickers wrongly. If the old man died, he would have been free to go openly under the name of Lee. "Can I do anything for you?" he asked aloud.

"No, thank you," Nellie answered. "My

uncle is asleep now, and Dr. Briggs will be back before long." And then, a sudden thought striking her, she asked: "Have you a spare minute, Mr. Overton?"

He said that all his time was at her disposal.

"Then you can do something for me. Come into the house. I want to say something to you. If my uncle had not been taken ill, I should have come to pay you a visit to-day."

"I am sorry I was done out of a visit from you," he returned. He signaled to his man to wait, and followed her into the little library where only the evening before Vickers had had his interview with Nuñez.

She shut the door, and though she smiled a little as she did so, plainly it was only to relieve the effect of her fateful manner.

"It wasn't going to be just a friendly call," she said. "I have something to tell you, and

I hate to say it." She hesitated and then went on again. "You have been very kind to Bob, Mr. Overton."

Overton's conscience gave a twinge. Did she know that he had advised his escape? "Oh, I don't know about that," he said. "I have had an extraordinary amount of pleasure out of his company."

"He is a pleasant companion," said the girl, "but I do not know whether you know much about his real self."

Overton laughed. "Why, Miss Nellie," he said, "I was just thinking that same thing about you."

"Yes," she agreed, "of course it must be absurd to you for me to be offering advice, considering your knowledge of the world and my ignorance——"

"Knowledge of the world," said Overton, "is not entirely a matter of experience. I should often prefer to trust the opinion of

the most innocent women to that of experienced men. Am I to understand that you entirely distrust your cousin?"

How was it possible that she could be ignorant of Vickers's escape? Or had it failed?

"No," answered Nellie. "I don't distrust him entirely. But you see in small superficial things Bob has such unusually nice qualities that one forgets. Last night when my uncle was taken ill——"

Overton looked up quickly. "Oh, your uncle was taken ill last night, was he? At what hour?"

"About one, I think. I went and called Bob and asked him to go for the doctor—I was very much alarmed at my uncle's condition—and in the most surprisingly short time Bob had dressed and gone out and come back again. It was like a conjuror's trick. And he has been so kind throughout this

dreadful night; and yet—" She paused, and gave a little sigh.

"Where is Bob at this moment?" said Overton.

"Oh, with his father. Uncle Robert will not let him leave him for an instant."

Overton did not answer. He felt unreasonably annoyed with Nellie for her attitude toward Vickers. The younger man's avowal of love rang in his ears. She ought to be able to tell a man when she saw one, he thought.

He stood up. "Well, I suppose I can't see him, then."

His tone did not please Nellie, nor the ease with which he dismissed her warning.

"But I have not finished what I wanted to say," she returned.

"Forgive me. You wished to warn me still further against the contaminating influence of your cousin?"

"I wanted to do nothing so futile," said Nellie, with spirit. "I had not come to the point yet. It was of Louisa that I was thinking."

"Of Louisa?" he repeated.

Nellie nodded. "I do not think that he is a good or safe friend for Louisa," she said. "You may tell me it is none of my business, but I am largely responsible for his being here, and James and I both thought I ought to speak to you."

"Am I to understand that Emmons thinks your cousin likely to attract Louisa?"

"James? Oh, I don't know whether James's opinion on that point would be very valuable. But I do."

"You surprise me," said Overton.

"I know. It must surprise you to realize that women should ever be attracted by men they can not respect, and yet it does sometimes happen, Mr. Overton. For myself I



can not imagine it, but I know there are girls to whom a man's mere charm——”

“Oh, but you misunderstand me entirely,” said Overton. “Of course I have seen quantities of just such cases as you have in mind—handsome scoundrels who fascinated every woman they came in contact with. But surely you do not think your cousin such a person.”

“Very much such a person.”

Overton wagged his head. “Well, well, you surprise me,” he returned. “A jovial, amusing fellow—a favorite with men, perhaps. But what would you say a girl could see in him?”

His malice was rewarded as malice ought not to be.

“Why,” said Nellie rather contemptuously, “think a moment. In the first place his looks. Any girl, at least any very young girl, might easily be carried away by such striking good looks.”

"Humph!" said Overton, pushing out his lips dubiously. "You think him good-looking?"

"Don't you?"

"A well-built figure," he answered, yielding a point.

"An unusually well-shaped head, and a wonderful line of jaw," said Nellie. "I may be prejudiced against Bob, but I never denied him looks."

"Well," said Overton, "we'll grant him looks. Has he anything else?"

"Yes," replied the girl, "the fact that he is amusing. Seeing him as I do, day in and day out, I realize how unfailingly pleasant and kind he is—in small things. And then he has another quality more difficult to define—a sort of humorous understanding of another person's point of view, which leads to a kind of intimacy, whatever your intention may be."

"Bless me," cried Overton, "you begin to alarm me. I fear you are describing a pretty dangerous fellow. My only consolation is that Louisa has never mentioned his name, nor indeed done anything to make me think she was interested in him."

Nellie did not look relieved. "Perhaps," she answered, "it is not the sort of thing that a father is the first person to know."

Overton shook his head sadly as he rose to go.

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "Perhaps one is not always the first person to know it oneself." And he hastily took his departure.

As he was going out he met Emmons, who stopped him, and after a brief interchange on the subject of Mr. Lee's illness, observed that he had been wanting a few words with Mr. Overton for some days.

"About Bob Lee, Mr. Overton. Do you know his past history?"

"I do," said Overton. He held up his hand and signaled to his coachman.

To so simple an answer Emmons for a moment could think of nothing to say, but feeling that so important a matter could not be so quickly settled he went on:

"Oh, of course, in that case I have nothing to say. It is no business of mine."

Overton was pulling on his gloves and did not reply.

"But have you ever thought, Mr. Overton, what sort of example your friendship with such a man offered to the community?"

"A very good example, I should think."

Again Emmons was confused. "Of Christian charity?" he asked.

"Of an even rarer virtue, Mr. Emmons—common-sense." And the great man got into his brougham and drove away.

## Chapter X

VICKERS had heard Overton's voice downstairs, and would have liked to explain his reasons for staying. And yet they would have been difficult to define. He had come home the evening before, fully determined to go. He had dressed and packed, and just as he was ready a knock had come at his door. Waiting only to hide his bags, and to shut up all the bureaus which the haste of his packing had left open, he heard Nellie call to him. For an instant he had thought that she had discovered his intention; the next he heard Nellie was asking him to go for a doctor.

Before dawn, however, a time had come when he might easily have slipped away, unobserved, if he had wanted to; and yet he had

not again thought of going. No one, he had said to himself, would go away and leave in such trouble the household that had sheltered him. Nor was it only the sense of companionship with Nellie that kept him, but the unwonted knowledge that some one depended on and needed him.

Trained nurses were not to be obtained in Hilltop, and even if they had been, most of the work of nursing would have devolved on Vickers, for Mr. Lee would not let him go out of his sight. All that day and most of the next night Vickers sat beside his bed, wondering whether the old man's death was to be the end of the story or the beginning. Should he stay, or should he go? He told himself that Overton was right, and that the only decent thing for a wanderer and a fugitive to do was to go quickly and quietly. But the remembrance of Emmons poisoned the vision of his own departure.

On the second day of his illness, Mr. Lee died. For all his devotion Vickers was not with him at the moment. The old man had fallen into a comfortable sleep about noon; and Nellie had made Vickers go and lie down. He was awakened a few hours afterward by the girl herself. She came and sat down beside his sofa, and told him gently that his father had died without waking.

"My poor child," said Vickers, "were you all alone?"

"I have been thinking that I ought to tell you, Bob," she went on, disregarding his interest in her welfare, "that you have so much more than made up to my uncle. He has been happier than I ever expected to see him. I think that must be a help to you, Bob;" and, under the impression that he was suffering a very intimate sorrow, she gave him her hand.

Vickers took it only for a moment, and then replaced it on her lap.

They sat in the twilight of the darkened room for some time, talking of plans and arrangements.

The funeral took place on Friday, and Hilltop, which had always honored the name of Lee, turned out in full force. And to increase Vickers's embarrassment, every member of the family came to pay the old gentleman a last token of respect.

"You must stand near me, Nellie," he said to her the morning of the funeral, "and tell me their names."

"Oh, you can't have forgotten them, Bob," she answered. "In the first place, Uncle Joseph, who gave you the goat when you were a little boy. You remember the goat, don't you?"

He merely smiled at her for answer, and taking his meaning, she returned quickly:

"Ah, not to-day, Bob. I could not bear



to think you would repudiate your father to-day." Then, after a moment, for he said nothing, she went on: "Of course you remember Bertha and Jane. You used to be so fond of Jane. They are coming by the early train. They must have left Philadelphia before eight o'clock. I think that is wholly on your account, Bob."

Subsequently he discovered that they were daughters of a sister of Mrs. Lee's, his supposed first cousins.

They came some minutes before any one else. Vickers was alone in the parlor decorously drawing on a pair of black gloves, when they were ushered in. Fortunately they were quite unmistakable—two neat, rustling, little black figures, followed by a solitary male, whose name proved to be Ferdinand. Looking up, Vickers greeted them without hesitation:

"Why, Jane and Bertha!" he cried.

They lifted their veils, displaying cheerful and pretty countenances, and to his intense amusement, each imprinted a kiss upon his ready cheek.

"Dear Bob," said one of them, "we are so sorry for you. And yet how glad you must have been to be at home when it happened. Poor Uncle Robert! We haven't seen him for years."

"Sam was so dreadfully sorry he could not come," said the other, with a manner so frankly disingenuous that Vickers could not resist answering:

"Aye, I suppose so!"

Not in the least abashed, the little lady smiled back.

"Well, it is strange," she admitted, "that he always has a toothache when it is a question of a family funeral. He keeps one tooth especially, I believe." And feeling that more friendly relations were now established, she

continued: "How tall you are, Bob. Were you always as tall as that? You look sad, poor boy. Why don't you come down after the ceremony, and stay a few weeks with us, and let us try to console you?"

"Thank you," said Vickers, "but I shall have to be here until to-morrow."

"Oh, I see. Nellie will need you. But you might ask her. Nellie," she added, "we want Bob to come with us after the funeral. He seems to think you can't spare him."

Nellie, who had just entered the room, looked for an instant somewhat confused by this sudden address, but almost at once she replied coldly that she had spared Bob for so many years that she could probably do it again.

Without very much encouragement the two new cousins continued to cling to Vickers throughout the remainder of the ceremonies. They looked upon him as a direct reward of

virtue. They had risen at an impossibly early hour, given up engagements merely from a sense of obligation to an old gentleman they hardly knew. The discovery of a good-looking cousin was a return—no more than just, but utterly unexpected.

For his part, if he had not been very conscious that this was his last day with Nellie, he would have enjoyed the company of the others. He took them down to the station and put them on their train, though he continued to refuse to accompany them.

“But you’ll come some day, soon, won’t you, Bob?” Bertha exclaimed. “I hear you are very wicked, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Yes,” said Vickers, “I myself understand that I am an excellent subject for reform.”

“We won’t try and reform you,” they answered; “we like you as you are,” and they kissed him again, and departed.

On his return to the house he heard that Nellie had gone to lie down, leaving word that Mr. Overton was coming after lunch. Overton had been Mr. Lee's man of business. He and Emmons arrived soon after two. They sat round the library stiffly. Only Overton seemed to be as usual, his calm Yankee face untouched by the constraint visible in the others.

"I don't know whether you want me actually to read the will itself," he said. "It is a very simple one. He leaves all the Hilltop property to his son, without restrictions of any kind. That is all he had to leave. The town house is nominally Nellie's, but it is mortgaged to its full value."

"Do you mean to say," Emmons cried, "that Nellie gets nothing?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry to say—perhaps a hundred or so, but I doubt even that."

"You mean that Mr. Lee did not even

leave her the equivalent of the sum which his son took from her? ”

“ That is exactly what I mean, Mr. Emmons.”

“ It is an iniquitous will. The man who made that will was mad, and no lawyer should have drawn it for him.”

“ I drew it,” said Overton gently.

“ You should not have done so, sir,” replied Emmons; “ knowing the facts as you do, you ought to have pointed out to the old man where his obligations lay.”

“ It is the profession of a clergyman, not of a lawyer, to point out his client’s duty, Mr. Emmons.”

Emmons looked from one to the other, and then, remembering the sudden friendship that had sprung up between them, he asked, “ And when was this will made? ”

“ Almost three years ago,” Overton answered, and there was silence until, seeing

Emmons about to break out again, Nellie said mildly,

“Really, James, if I can bear it, I think you might.”

“The sacrifices you made—” Emmons began, but she stopped him.

“Blood is thicker than water. It would be a pretty poor sort of world if men did not love their own children better than other people’s.”

“Oh, if you are satisfied,” said Emmons bitterly; and then changed his sentence but not his tone. “All I can say is I am glad you all are pleased.”

“You have not given us much of a chance to say whether we were or not,” suggested Vickers mildly.

Emmons turned on him. “I don’t have to ask whether you are satisfied or not. I don’t imagine that you have any complaint to make.”

"None at all," said Vickers.

"Do you mean to tell me that you would take that property?" Emmons demanded.

"What are you talking about, James?" said Nellie. "Of course Bob will take what his father leaves to him."

"I shall have my opinion of him if he does."

"Well," said Vickers, "if anything could separate me from an inheritance, it would certainly be the fear of Mr. Emmons's criticism."

"I shall only call your attention to one thing," said Emmons, flushing slightly. "Does it ever strike you, Mr. Bob *Lee*, to ask what it was saved you from criminal prosecution twelve years ago? No? Well, I'll tell you. Respect for your father, and the fact that you did not have any money. Both of these conditions have changed to-day."



Vickers turned to Overton as if he had not heard. "I wonder," he said, "if we could not talk over family affairs more comfortably if there were no outsiders present."

"James is not an outsider," said Nellie.

"He is to me," said Vickers.

"If he goes, I go too," Nellie answered.

"In that case," said Vickers, "of course he must be allowed to stay, but perhaps you will be so good as to ask him, if he must be here, not to interrupt——"

"Come, come," said Overton hastily, "can't we effect some compromise in this matter? As I understand it, Mr. Emmons believes that certain sums are owed Miss Nellie by you——"

"Compromise be damned, Overton," said Vickers. "You know this money is not mine, and I won't touch it."

Nellie started up. "The money is yours, Bob. My uncle would never have pinched

and saved to pay me back. The money exists only because he loved you so much. It is yours."

Vickers smiled at her. "I am glad," he said, "that I do not have to argue that extremely sophistical point with you. The reason that the money is not mine is—I hate to repeat a statement that you asked me not to make again—but I am not Bob Lee."

He had the satisfaction of seeing that, for the first time, she weighed the possibility of the assertion's being true.

"What does he mean, Mr. Overton?" she asked.

"He means he is not the person he represented himself as being."

"What is this?" cried Emmons, who had remained silent hitherto only from a species of stupefaction. "Is he trying to make us believe that his own father did not know him? What folly! How frivolous!"

Nellie's face clouded again; evidently to her, too, it seemed folly, but she said temperately:

"At least, James, it will cost him his inheritance, if he can make us believe him. He certainly does not gain by the assertion."

"What?" cried Emmons. "How can you be so blind! He was willing enough to be Bob Lee—he kept mighty quiet, until I threatened suit. He was willing enough to take the money, until it looked dangerous; and then we began to hear that he was not the fellow at all."

Nellie turned desperately to Overton.

"Mr. Overton," she said, "do you believe this story?"

Overton nodded. "Yes," he said, "I do; but I must tell you that I have no proofs of any kind, no facts, no evidence."

"Then why do you believe it?"

"Why, indeed?" murmured Emmons

with a carefully suppressed laugh; "a very good question."

"I have asked myself why," Overton answered, "and I can find only two reasons, if they may be called so. First, I do feel a difference between this man and the Bob Lee I used to know—a difference of personality. And, second, I have never had any reason to doubt this man's word."

"Ah, but I have," said Nellie. "As a boy Bob was not truthful."

"I was not speaking of Lee," said Overton.

Nellie put her hand to her head. "Oh, I don't know what to think," she said, and jumped up and walked to the window, as if to get away from Emmons, who was ready to tell her exactly what to think.

She stood there, and there was silence in the room. Overton sat feeling his chin, as if interested in nothing but the closeness of his

morning's shave. Vickers, though his head was bent, had fixed his eyes on Nellie; and Emmons leant back with the manner of the one sane man in a party of lunatics.

Nellie was the first to speak. Turning from the window she asked.

"If you are not my cousin, who are you?"

"My name is Lewis Vickers."

She thought it over a minute, and threw out her hands despairingly.

"Oh, it is impossible!" she cried. "Why, if you were not my cousin, should you have stayed and worked for us, and borne all the hideous things I said to you? Only a saint would do such a thing."

"He'll not ask you to believe him a saint," put in Overton.

"No, I don't even claim to be much of an improvement on Lee."

"Oh, any one would be an improvement on poor Bob."

In answer, Vickers got up, and going over to where she stood beside the window, he told her his story. He told it ostensibly to her alone, but Emmons on the sofa was plainly an interested listener. Vickers spoke with that simplicity, that directness and absence of any attempt at self-justification, which the wise use when they are most desirous of being leniently judged.

From the first, he began to hope that he was succeeding. Nellie regarded him with a clear and steady glance from the start, and when he had finished, she remained gazing at him—no longer doubtful, but with something almost terror-stricken in her expression.

In the pause that followed, Emmons turned to the lawyer.

“Now, you are a clever man, Mr. Overton,” he said easily. “Perhaps you can explain to me, why it is that a fellow who is

known to be a thief and a liar should be in such a hurry to write himself down a murderer as well? ”

The tone and manner of the interruption, coming at a moment of high emotion, were too much for Vickers's temper. He turned on Emmons white with rage.

“ I've stood about as much as I mean to stand from you,” he said. “ Overton and Nellie are welcome to believe me or not as they like, but you will either believe me or leave this house.”

His tone was so menacing that Overton stood up, expecting trouble, but it was Nellie who spoke.

“ James will do nothing of the kind,” she said. “ If you are not Bob Lee you have no right to say who shall stay in this house and who shall not. The house is mine, and I won't have any one in it who can't be civil to James.”

"Then you certainly can't have me," said Vickers.

"It seems not," answered Nellie.

They exchanged such a steel-like glance as only those who love each other can inflict, and then Vickers flung out of the house.

When, a few minutes later, Overton caught up with him, his anger had not cooled.

"Hush, hush, my dear fellow," said the lawyer. "Hilltop is not accustomed to such language. Let a spirited lady have her heroics if she wants."



## Chapter XI

**L** EFT alone with her *fiancé*, perhaps Nellie expected a word of praise for her gallant public demonstration in his favor. If so, she was disappointed.

“Upon my word!” he exclaimed, as the door shut after Vickers. “I never in all my life heard such an audacious impostor. Imagine his daring to pass himself off as Mr. Lee’s son throughout an entire month!”

“He told me within twenty-four hours of his arrival that he was not Bob Lee, and I think he told you, too, James; only you would not believe him.”

Emmons took no notice of this reply, but continued his own train of thought. “When I think that for four weeks you have been practically alone in the house with an escaped

murderer—for I don't believe a word of all this story about false testimony—my blood runs cold. And it is only by the merest chance that we have succeeded in rescuing all your uncle's property from his hands."

"I think you are wrong, James. Mr. Vickers never intended to accept my uncle's property."

"My dear Nellie! Women are so extraordinarily innocent in financial matters. That was the object of his whole plot."

"I don't think it was a plot. It seems to me, indeed, that we both owe an apology to Mr. Vickers."

"An apology!" said Emmons, and his color deepened. "I think you must be mad, Nellie. I think I owe an apology to the community for having left him at large so long. I ought to have telegraphed to the sheriff of Vickers's Crossing at once, and I mean to do so without delay."

Nellie rose to her feet. "If you do that, James—" she began, and then, perhaps remembering that she had been accused of being over-fond of threats in the past, she changed her tone. "You will not do that, I am sure, James, when you stop to consider that you heard Mr. Vickers's story only because I insisted on having you present. It would be a breach of confidence to me as well as to him."

Emmons laughed. "The law, my dear girl," he said, "does not take cognizance of these fine points. It is my duty when I have my hand on an escaped murderer to close it, and I intend to do so. He probably means to leave Hilltop to-night, and I shall not be able to get a warrant from Vickers's Crossing until to-morrow, but I can arrange with the local authorities to arrest him on some trumped-up charge that will hold him, until we get the papers."

He moved toward the door; to his surprise Nellie was there before him.

"One moment," she said. "I don't think you understand how I feel about this matter. I know Mr. Vickers better than you do. Whatever he may have done in the past, I feel myself under obligations to him. He has done more than you can even imagine, James, to make my uncle's last days happy. He has been more considerate of me," she hesitated, and then went on,— "more considerate of me, in some ways, than any one I have ever met, though I have been uniformly insolent and high-handed with him. I admire Mr. Vickers in many respects."

"It is not ten minutes, however, since you turned him out of your house."

Nellie was silent, and then she made a decisive gesture. "I will not have you telegraph for that warrant, James. I let you stay under the impression that you were an

honorable man, and I will not have Mr. Vickers betrayed through my mistake."

"Honor! betrayed!" cried Emmons. "Aren't we using pretty big words about the arrest of a common criminal? I am very sorry if you disapprove, Nellie, but I have never yet allowed man or woman to interfere with what I consider my duty, and I don't mean to now. Let me pass, please."

She did not at once move. "Oh, I'll let you pass, James," she answered deliberately, "only I want you to understand what it means. I won't marry you, if you do this. I don't know that I could bring myself to marry you anyhow, now."

She had the art of irritating her opponent, and Emmons exclaimed, "I dare say you prefer this jailbird to me."

She did not reply in words, but she moved away from the door, and Emmons went out of it. The instant he had gone she rang the

bell, and when Plimpton appeared she said: "Tell the coachman that I want a trap and the fastest horse of the pair just as quickly as he can get it. Tell him to hurry, Plimpton."

Plimpton bowed, though he did not approve of servants being hurried. He liked orders to be given in time. Nevertheless, he gave her message, and within half an hour she was in Mr. Overton's drawing-room. The great man greeted her warmly.

"Do you know, my dear Nellie," he said, almost as he entered, "I was just thinking that I ought to have made an appointment to see you again. Of course you are in a hurry to get a complete schedule of your new possessions, and to know what you may count on in the future. Shall we say to-morrow—that is Saturday, isn't it?—about three?"

"Oh, there is not the least hurry about that," returned Nellie, and her manner was

unusually agitated, "any time you like. I did not come about that. I came to ask you if you knew where Bob is—Mr. Vickers, I mean?"

"Yes," said Overton, "I do!"

"Something dreadful has happened," Nellie went on with less and less composure. "I have only just found it out. As soon as our interview was over, James Emmons told me he meant to telegraph to Vickers's Crossing, or whatever the name of the place is, for a warrant. He expects to be able to arrest Mr. Vickers at once."

"He does, does he—the hound!" cried Overton, for the first time losing his temper. He rang a bell, and when a servant answered it he ordered a trap to be ready at once. Returning to Nellie, he found that she had buried her face in her handkerchief, and he repented his violence.

"There, there, forgive me, Miss Nellie,"

he said. "I did not mean to call him a hound. I forgot that you were going to marry him."

"Oh, don't apologize to me," replied Nellie, with some animation; "I wish I had said it myself. I am not going to marry him."

The news startled Overton. "Why, is that wise, my dear child?" he said. "Perhaps neither of us does him justice. He is a good, steady, reliable man, and if I were you, I would not go back on him in a hurry."

"He is not any one of those things," said Nellie, drying her eyes, and looking as dignified as the process allowed. "He is base. He took advantage of what he heard in confidence—of what he only heard at all because I made a point of his being there. Is that reliable, or steady? I call it dishonorable and I would rather die than marry such a creature, and so I told him."

"You know your own business best," an-



swered Overton, "but the world is a sad place for lonely women."

"It would be a very sad place for both James and me, if I married him feeling as I do," said Nellie, and judging by her expression Overton was inclined to agree with her. "It was all very well while I could respect James, but now——"

"Still, ordinary prudence——" the lawyer began, but she interrupted.

"Don't talk to me about ordinary prudence. That is what led me into the awful mistake of being engaged to him at all. I thought it would be wise. I used to get thinking about the future, and whether I should have anything to live on——"

"And you don't think of these things now?"

"I don't care sixpence about the future," returned Nellie, "and I'm sure I don't know why I've been crying, except that I am tired,

and I think I'll go home. You'll warn Mr. Vickers, won't you? "

" I will," said Overton.

Nellie still hesitated. " He is here, I suppose."

" Yes. He was thinking of staying to dine with me, and taking a late train to town. He has a steamer to catch to-morrow; but after what you say "—Overton looked at his watch—" I rather think that he had better go at once. There's a train within half an hour."

" Oh, he had much better go at once, before James has time to make trouble," she answered; and then added gravely, " Mr. Overton, do you believe that the murder happened just as Mr. Vickers said? "

" Do you? "

" Yes."

" So do I," Overton answered, " but then I have some reason, for I remember something of the case, which was a very celebrated

one up the State. And now, Nellie, I'll tell you a secret which I wouldn't trust to any one else. I have an impression—a vague one, but still I trust it—that that case was set straight, somehow or other. If it should be——”

“Telegraph and find out.”

“I wrote some days ago—the night before your uncle was taken ill; but I have had no answer. But mind, don't tell him. It would be too cruel, if I should turn out to be wrong.”

“I?” said Nellie. “I don't ever expect to see the man again.”

“I suppose not,” he returned, “and yet I wish it were not too much to ask you to take him to the station in your trap. He won't have more than time, and mine has not come to the door yet.”

Nellie looked as if she were going to refuse, but when she spoke she spoke quite definitely: “I'll take him,” she said.

"Thank you," said Overton, and left the room.

In his library he found Vickers standing on the hearthrug, though there was no fire in the chimney-place. His head was bent and he was vaguely chinking some coins in his pocket.

"Well, Vickers," said his host coolly, "I have a disagreeable piece of news for you. Emmons, it seems, has telegraphed for a warrant, and does not intend to let you go until he gets it, but possibly he won't be prepared for your slipping away at once. There's a train at five-ten. Do you care to try it?"

Vickers looked up, as if the whole matter were of very small interest to him. "There does not seem to be anything else to do, does there?" he said.

"Of course, my offer of a position is still open to you."

"I can't stay in this country with Emmons

on my heels. They'd lock me up in a minute."

"You have never heard anything further about your case, have you?"

"Not a word. There wasn't much to hear, I expect. I suppose I had better be going."

"Your bags are at the Lees' still, aren't they?"

"And can stay there, for all I care. I'll not put foot in that house again."

"I hope you don't feel too resentfully towards Miss Lee," Overton began, "for in the first place it was she who brought me word of this move of Emmons, and in the second——"

"I don't feel resentful at all," interrupted Vickers. "But I don't feel as if I wanted to go out of my way to see her again."

"And in the second," Overton went on, "the only way you can possibly catch your train now is to let her drive you down. She

has a trap outside, and she seemed to be——”

He paused, for the door had slammed behind Vickers, and when he followed, the two were already in the trap. Overton smiled.

“That’s right,” he said, “make haste; but you might at least say good-by to a man you may never see again. Good-by, my dear fellow; good luck.”

Vickers, a little ashamed, shook hands with the older man in silence, and Overton went on: “Whatever happens, Vickers, do not resist arrest. I have ordered a trap and I’ll follow you as soon as it comes. Not that I anticipate any trouble.”

They drove away, and Overton as he entered the house murmured to himself, “Not that they listened to a word I said.”

Yet if they had not listened, it did not seem to be from any desire to talk themselves. They drove out of the gates in silence, and had gone some distance before Nellie asked,

"Where shall you go to-night, Mr. Vickers?"

"Thank you for your interest," returned Vickers bitterly, "but it seems that my plans have been quite sufficiently spread about Hill-top. Perhaps it would be as well for me not to answer your question. I am going away."

Not unnaturally this speech angered Nellie. "You do not seem to understand," she said, "that I came to warn you that you must go."

"I was going anyhow," he retorted, "but of course I am very much obliged to you for any trouble you may have taken."

"I thought it my duty," she began, but he interrupted her with a laugh.

"Your duty, of course. You never do anything from any other motive. That is exactly why I do not tell you my plans. You might feel it your duty to repeat them to

Emmons. I think I remember your saying that you always tell him everything."

"You are making it," said Nellie, in a voice as cool as his own, "rather difficult for me to say what I think is due to you—and that is that I owe you an apology for having insisted yesterday——"

"You owe me so many apologies," returned Vickers, "that you will hardly have time to make them between here and the station, so perhaps it is hardly worth while to begin."

"You have a right to take this tone with me," said Nellie, acutely aware how often she had taken it with him. "But you shall not keep me from saying, Mr. Vickers, that I am very conscious of how ill I have treated you, and that your patience has given me a respect for you—" She stopped, for Vickers laughed contemptuously; but as he said nothing in answer, she presently went on



again: "I do not know what it is that strikes you as ludicrous in what I am saying. I was going to add that I should like to hear, now and then, how you are getting on, if it is not too much to ask."

He turned on her. "You mean you want me to *write* to you?"

She nodded.

"I am afraid your future husband would not approve of the correspondence, and as you tell him everything—no, I had far better risk it now, and tell you my plans at once. I am going to South America, where I am going to be a real live general over a small but excellent little army. I know, for I made some of it myself."

"And will you be safe there?"

"Yes, if you mean from Emmons and the process of the law. On the other hand, some people do not consider soldiering the very safest of professions—especially in those coun-

tries, where they sometimes really fight, and, contrary to the popular notion, when they do fight, it is very much the real thing. Fancy your feelings, Nellie, when some day you read in the papers: 'The one irreparable loss to the Liberal party was the death of General Don Luis Vickers, who died at the head of his column. . . .' Ah, I should die happy, if only I could die with sufficient glory to induce Emmons to refer to me in public as 'an odd sort of fellow, a cousin of my wife's.' I can hear him. My spirit would return to gloat."

"He will never say that," said Nellie, with a meaning which Vickers, unhappily, lost.

"Ah, you can't tell, Nellie. 'General Luis Vickers' sounds so much better than 'Vickers, the man the police want.' And Emmons's standards, I notice, depend almost entirely on what people say. Nellie," he went on suddenly, "I have something to say to you.

You and I are never going to see each other again, and Heaven knows I don't want to write to you or hear from you again. This is all there will ever be, and I am going to offer you a piece of advice as if I were going to die to-morrow. Don't marry Emmons! He is not the right sort. Perhaps you think I have no right to criticise a man who has always kept a good deal straighter than I, but it is just because I have knocked about that I know. He won't do. You are independent now. Your farm will bring you in something. Keep the fellow I put in there, and sell a few of the upland lots. You won't be rich, but you'll be comfortable. Don't marry Emmons."

"Why do you say this to me?"

"Because I know it's the right thing to say. I can say anything to you. As far as a woman like you is concerned, I realize a man like myself—without a cent, without even a decent name—doesn't exist at all; not

even Emmons himself could suppose that in advising you not to marry him, I have any hope for myself."

"And yet that is just what he does think." She forced herself to look at him, and her look had the anxious temerity of a child who has just defied its elders.

"Nellie, what do you mean?"

"I am not going to marry Mr. Emmons."

"You are not! You are *not!!* Oh, my darling! What a place the world is! Have I really lost you?"

Nellie smiled at him, without turning her head. "I thought you had no hope."

He had no sense of decency, for he kissed her twice on the public highway. "I haven't," he answered. "I can't stay, and you can't go with me. Imagine you in the tropics."

"I certainly can't go if I'm not asked."

"Think what you are saying to me,

woman," he answered. "In another moment I shall ask you if you love me, and then——"

She turned to him, and put her hand in his. "Suppose you do ask me," she said.

Vickers held it, and bent his head over it, and laid it against his mouth, but he shook his head. "No," he said, "I won't. I have just one or two remnants of decency left, and I won't do that."

He stopped: for Nellie had turned the horse down an unexpected road. "Where are you going?" he said.

"Back to the house. You can't sail without your things."

"My dear girl, I've spent half my life traveling without my things."

"Well, you aren't going to do it any more," she answered, and her tone had so domestic a flavor that he kissed her again.

Plimpton met them in the hall, and Nellie lost no time.

"Pack Mr. Vickers's things at once, please," she said, and would have passed on, but she was arrested by Plimpton's voice.

"*Whose*, 'Madam?' " he asked; like many men of parts, he believed that to be puzzled and to be insulted are much the same thing.

"Mine, Plimpton, mine," said Vickers. "And just for once leave out as much of the tissue paper and cotton wool as possible. I've a train to catch."

"And tell my maid to pack something for me—as much as she can get into a valise; and tea at once, Plimpton."

Plimpton did not say that he totally disapproved of the whole plan, but his tone was very cold, as he said that tea was already served in the drawing-room.

"Goodness only knows when we shall see food again," Nellie remarked as she sat down behind the tea-kettle.

"I can hardly catch my train, Nellie."

"No matter. We can drive over to the other line—nine or ten miles."

"It will be rather a long lonely journey back, won't it?"

"For the horse, you mean?" said Nellie. "Well, to tell the truth I don't exactly know how the horse is going to get back and I don't much care."

"Nellie," said Vickers, and he laid his hand on her shoulder with a gesture that was almost paternal. "I can't let you do this. You have no idea what a life it would be,—what it would mean to be the wife of a man who——"

"I shall know very soon," returned she irrepressibly. "But I have some idea what a life it would be to be left behind, and so I am afraid you must put this newly-found prudence of yours in your pocket, and make up your mind——"

But she did not finish a sentence whose

end was fairly obvious, for the door was thrown open in Plimpton's best manner, and Emmons entered. He stopped on seeing Vickers, and stared at him with round eyes.

"*You!*" he cried. "This is the last place I should have thought of looking for you."

"But does not a meeting like this make amends—" Vickers began lightly, but Nellie struck a better note with her cool: "I should think this would have been the most natural place to look. Tea, James?"

"No, thank you," replied Emmons sternly. "I've no time for tea just now. I parted from the sheriff not ten minutes ago, and I must go and find him at once."

"Sorry you won't stay and have a chat," said Vickers. "But doubtless you know best."

"You'll find out what I know within half an hour," said Emmons, and left the room, slamming the door behind him.



"James is developing quite a taste for repartee," observed Vickers.

Nellie rose, put out the light under the kettle, and began to draw on her gloves.

"We must start now," she said.

"Now, or never," said Vickers.

They were half-way down the drive before Nellie asked in the most matter-of-fact tone,

"Are the bags in?"

He nodded.

"Mine, too?"

"Yours, too, Nellie. Weak-kneed that I am, when I felt it in my hand, I said a brave man would leave this one behind, but—I put it in."

Catching his eye, she smiled. "That was very kind of you," she said, "for I, you know, have not spent half my life traveling without my things."

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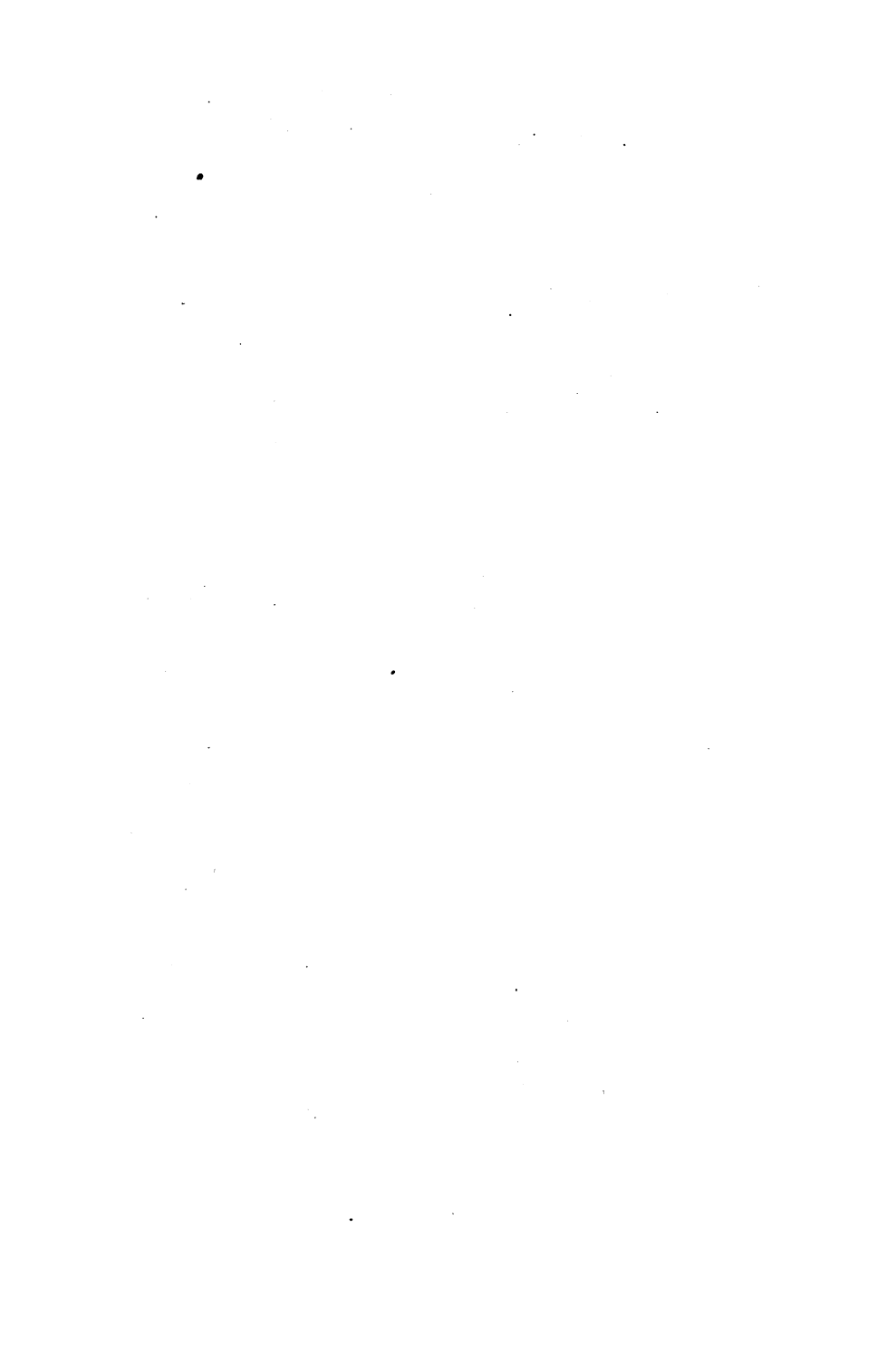
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